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by FRANK CASTLE

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LAST OF THE VALIANT

By DAVID A. WEISS

The Story of Cochise, Mightiest of Apaches

AT LAST Cochise, the great Apache chief, has taken his proper role in history. Thanks to Hollywood where he has been made the hero of three biographies, Cochise emerges the valiant noble chief he really was, and not the bloodthirsty savage he was once depicted.

Even though Cochise was the leader of the Chiricahuas, the wildest and fiercest of all the Apache tribes, he started out the best friend the white man ever had in the Southwest. For years this tall Indian (his 6 feet 2 inches made him one of the tallest Apaches who ever lived) was a familiar visitor to Army posts in Arizona and New Mexico.

At least once a month Cochise would lead his tribe into the forts to trade. And he was one Indian who could hold his whiskey. Never hesitating to drink, he also never failed to make sure both he and his tribe left the fort before dawn.

In those days Cochise not only let the Overland Stage run its stages through famous Apache Pass, he even protected its drivers against renegades like Geronimo.

All the Southwest knew Cochise for his two unusual qualities—never smiling and never telling a lie. All except Lieutenant George A. Bascom, fresh from West Point, who came to Apache Pass and accused Cochise of kidnapping a small Mexican boy.

"I know nothing," the tall Apache chief said truthfully.

But Bascom refused to listen.

"Arrest that man," he ordered.

That night Cochise escaped, vowing vengeance. He swore he would kill ten white men for every Apache slain. And he more than made good his promise. So dangerous did he make the trip through the Apache Pass between 1862 and 1874, the Overland Stage offered its drivers triple pay to pull its stages through. Few took up the offer and of those who did, even fewer lived to collect it.

The bloody war went on for years. Hundreds of lives were taken and millions of dollars of property were destroyed. And all because a young soldier boy wouldn't listen.

Although Cochise never lost a battle, he was unable to drive out the white men. And in 1862 when the Army ordered its famous California column from Tucson to New Mexico to hunt for Confederate cavalry, Cochise met them coming through Apache Pass. With 400 warriors, he attacked eleven infantry companies, two cavalry companies, and two artillery battalions.

The Apaches had everything their own way until the Army brought up something the Indians had never seen before—artillery. As Cochise himself said later, "We were doing all right until they started firing wagons at us."

The Apaches retreated, but still they were not defeated in battle. Several years later, Tom Jeffords, a stage coach driver, walked unarmed into Cochise's camp and persuaded him to sign a peace treaty.

When Cochise died, Jeffords was the only white man to know the exact location of his grave in Stronghold Canyon. But all the Apaches knew and revered it.

Even today when they travel among the mountains Cochise loved so well, the Apaches will not touch their favorite food which grows in Stronghold Canyon—acorns—because that's where Cochise, the greatest chief of the Apaches, lies buried. ♠ ♠ ♠

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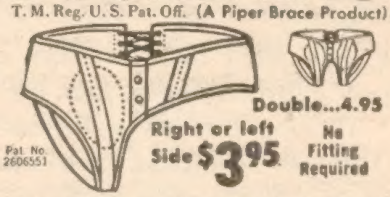

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FRONTIER FUN

By HAL HORN

COLORADO sports in the 1870's tended to be a little rough. One of the real favorites was mass wrestling, not unlike that practiced today in Japan. Ten, twenty or more men would step into a marked off area sometimes half an acre square.

Each man piled into the man next to him in an effort to throw him out of the "ring." Pinning a fellow to the mat wasn't worth a broken shot-glass. Sometimes two or more men would gang up on one. The rules said nothing about this one way or another. The survivors turned on one another and started all over again.

The general idea was that there would be just one survivor. Arms and legs broken in the struggle netted a fellow only the derision of the less injured and the outright contempt of the winner.

An equally rough sport of the time was sometimes called "Indian jumping." Generally this was played in a creek. On other occasions a suitable playground would be manufactured—that's when it was really rough.

The object of this game was for players to jump from one water or mud surrounded rock to another. Each rock was placed a little farther apart and intervening distances were sometimes doctored with below water jagged rocks and sticks to help a fellow cut himself up. This was supposed to stimulate competitors not to miss.

Toward the end of the "run" the goals were six and a half to seven feet apart—it says in an old book. To make the game as interesting as possible players were not permitted to remove the high heeled and spurred boots by this time prevalent.

For the guys who got wet there wasn't even a shot of whiskey. ♠ ♠ ♠

GAMBLER'S LUCK

THE hell-or-high-water gambling spirit of old days is not what it used to be. As an example, take Berwil Putnam, a present-day postal worker, of Arizona. Ten years ago, somebody bet Putnam he couldn't walk through the Grand Canyon at the point where it is a mile deep. No man, red or white, ever had walked that stretch before—nobody, far as is known, has walked it since. The stretch lasts for a hundred miles. There are no towns en route, no telephones, no real shores to the Colorado River—nothing.

Putnam set out, bound like a Westerner to see the bet through, with three canteens of drinking water, a couple of sacks of food and a bedroll—most of which he lost in the river almost at once. On foot, alone—most likely he was on his vacation from the post office—and with almost no supplies, he fought the rapids, the day's heat and the night's cold for a hundred miles. It took him over a week, and by some miracle of guts and stubbornness he made it.

He collected his winnings, all right, but they must have looked mighty small after the size of the Grand Canyon. The bet had been for a dime.

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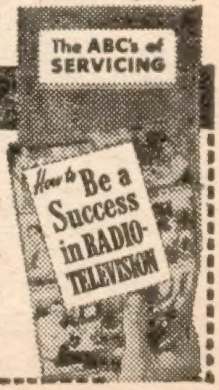

GUN SHY

The animal hit that front door and crashed through.

By FRANK P. CASTLE

SHERIFF STEVE Kurland of Rufino County in the territory of New Mexico came back from the Temescal hills and into Verde City at late dusk; he had planned it this way. Both Ki Stamper and Jim Aitken would be watching for him, and he didn't want to see either of these feuding cattlemen before stopping at the courthouse.

He turned into Trinidad Street, where the town's four business blocks were lo-

Every time Sheriff Steve Kurland heard the dread name Finch Halleck his blood ran cold. . . . But now on the grim showdown day Steve faced the lightning guns of the killer with a new courage—born at his last moment before hell!

cated. It was a silent, dark area at this hour. Farther south, below the railroad tracks that bisected Verde City, the ruddy glow from saloons and honky-tonks flared high. Reflected illumination showed someone standing beside a two-seat spring buggy just up the street from Mitch Judson's store. Kurland reined down.

"Having trouble?" he asked. Then he wished he had passed on by. The fellow

standing there was Bob Bentley, Ki Stamper's foreman, a big handsome young man who, in Steve Kurland's opinion, was something of a loud-mouthed fool. This, however, was not what was bothering him at the moment; rather, it was the certainty that Bentley would hustle to Stamper with the news that he was back.

Bentley said fretfully, "Got a loose wheel on this rig."

"Kind of dark to tinker with it here," Kurland said. "You'd better drive around to a livery."

"Why, yeah!" Bentley said, as though he would never have thought of this by himself. Kurland looked at Judson's store and saw a light against the front window. He shifted in saddle, wondering about it, and said, "Isn't that Jim Aitken's bay at Judson's hitch-rack?"

Bentley nodded, and suddenly became voluble.

"Aitken's been dickering with Judson all afternoon for Green Valley. Looks like a sale, at fifteen thousand bucks. Cash—you know how Judson likes money he can stack up and gloat over. I heard talk Aitken borrowed it somewhere—Listen, Kurland, did you find that boundary marker of Ki's that you went hunting?"

Steve Kurland did not reply. Aitken the owner of Green Valley—this was very disturbing news. It meant the sullenly bubbling feud between Aitken and Ki Stamper was fast coming to a boil—and Kurland had not been able to find a way to keep it from spilling over.

"Ki's waiting at the Chicago House. You better hightail it there right now and tell him what you found," Bentley said.

Kurland rode on across First Street. He saw a barber shop still open and stopped, swinging down. He needed time to think—needed a bath, too.

The barber said, "Hey, sheriff, the El Paso paper says Finch Halleck stuck up a bank at Van Horn last Friday!"

"Every bank that is stuck up anywhere, Halleck gets the blame," Kurland said. "And he's dead—"

At least, he hoped the famed outlaw was dead. That story out of Wyoming about his death had sounded pretty circumstantial. Kurland hoped Finch Halleck was buried deep—and wondered if this desire made him a coward. He said, "I'll be back in a minute," and went onto the walk again.

He had seen someone standing across the street, in the deep doorway of the Rufino County bank. A woman, he discovered in surprise. As he approached, she lifted a cigarette to her lips, and spoke in a husky, eager voice, "Do you have a light for me?"

Kurland grunted, surprise increasing. This was a town where no woman smoked on the street, not even the kind across the tracks who habitually used cigarettes. A new dancehall girl, strayed from where she belonged, he supposed, and scratched a match for a look at her.

More surprise—she was no dancehall girl. A stranger, fairly tall, dressed in a good gray suit, with upswept fair hair. Young and pretty—not, of course to be compared with Irene Stamper's dazzling loveliness. Irene was Ki's niece, and had come to live with the old rancher only a couple of months ago. She had been in Steve Kurland's thoughts a lot lately; he had fallen into the habit of comparing other women with her, always to Irene's credit.

"Where is he?" this strange young woman demanded tautly.

"Who?" Kurland said.

She made a dismayed sound and blew at the match, trying to put it out. He cupped the flame with his hands, wondering about the blend of fright, anger, and bitter disappointment in her features.

"I—I've made a mistake," she said. "Please go away!"

The cigarette was still between her lips, trembling there. He considered for a moment. It was really no business of his, and he couldn't perceive anything in her action except perhaps foolishness.

"All right," Kurland said, blowing out the match. "But a tough little gent is due here soon, making his rounds. He's Jack Tiler, marshal of this town—and a woman who smokes on the street, to his way of thinking, belongs in jail. You'd better move along."

"Why, I don't have to—" she began defiantly, then bit her lip, eyes narrowed in thought. "I guess I will. And—thanks . . ."

Kurland watched her start slowly west on First. He looked back up Trinidad, and saw the buggy still there. Bentley had disappeared—*hustling across lots to carry the news to Stamper*, he thought wearily.

BACK IN the barber shop, Kurland sat down and began to read about Finch Halleck and the Van Horn bank. He was just past the flaring headlines when the guns began to roar.

The harsh boom of a .45, two shots—then a .38 going off like a string of firecrackers. A pane in the barber's window came down in broken sheets. The barber hit the floor. Kurland hesitated a fractional instant, then went through the door, .44 in his fist as he sprinted back across First Street.

Mitch Judson was down, in the doorway of his store. Jim Aitken was bending over him.

"What happened, Aitken?" Kurland yelled.

The big cattleman straightened, staring at him.

"Huh? Oh—Kurland— Hold-up! One fellow, alone. He got Judson, and grabbed the cash. I threw everything in my .38. He ran up Trinidad—"

There was a midblock alley. Kurland stopped, just short of it. After the crashing echoes of the guns, the street was silent. Aitken joined him, putting a hand on his arm.

"He didn't go in there!"

"Where did he run to, then?" Kurland said. "Street or walk, he'd still be making some noise, if he went straight on ahead."

"Well—but don't go ramming in—that son was wearing a pair of guns! Wait here, and I'll hustle around to plug the other end."

Kurland did not want to go into the alley. But he shook off Aitken's hand.

"The son might be moving too fast for you." Kurland slid around a corner and stopped with his back against a wall.

Silence and blackness in the alley—and a scrape of boots, instantly silenced. The bandit had stopped, perhaps discovering how long this alley was, and now meant to come out the way he had gone in. Kurland couldn't see a thing. He was sweating, instantly, his heart pounding hard, with treacherous memory of the triphammer crunch of lead, the grinding pain that had followed, another time. He took off his hat and threw it at the opposite wall, hoping the other would fire at it and betray his position. Nothing happened.

He might have known something like this would occur, should never have let himself be persuaded to finish out a dead sheriff's term of office. After what had happened to him at Tucson, he should never have tried again. But the job here, with tax fees, averaged five hundred a month, and in the three years since Tucson he had discovered law work was all he was really fitted for. He had been born and raised in Verde City, and the reputation made behind a star in Arizona had come home ahead of him. Only the reputation; nobody knew what three slugs from a .45 had done to him—at least, he hoped nobody knew.

He couldn't just stand here—and he couldn't force himself to walk up to that waiting thief, either. Kurland sent a random shot along the alley, and was belly-down in the dust almost before his powder stopped burning. If he did stop another slug, it wouldn't be in front; he couldn't take that again in this lifetime.

Scarlet fire slashed the blackness, shots racking back and forth. The outlaw was

triggering both of his weapons with stuttering speed, spraying lead all around where he had seen the flash of Kurland's .44, Kurland tilted up his iron and loosed one more bullet with care, placing it just between the two blazing muzzles.

He heard the thud as the slug drove home, the sick grunt as the man took it. Then a hard, sodden fall.

Kurland rose again, angry at himself because of the shaky relief he felt. He snapped a match, and turned the outlaw over for a look.

This was a big fellow with a broad, twisted face, dead eyes. But nobody he knew. He pried a gun from his hand; it was a fancy iron, with a lot of silver trim.

Aitken joined him, and bent to pick up a small satchel.

"Here's the money. I'll take it for Judson—"

Kurland plucked the satchel from him.

"Some legal business connected with that—formal proof of ownership required. I'll see Judson gets it tomorrow."

"Listen, you saying I'm not to be trusted?" Aitken snapped.

"I said what you heard. The law is specific about property recovered after a holdup attempt. Get out of the way."

People were appearing, crowding around, including a man with a lantern.

"Bring that here," Kurland ordered, and lifted the outlaw's other gun. It matched the first.

The man with the lantern made a startled sound. "Hey! Look at what's on those irons!"

Kurland turned the guns for closer inspection. He hadn't noticed until now that each butt was decorated, on the outside, with a silver *F. H.*

The excited talk began, then; in short minutes, it would race all over town.

"Finch Halleck! Steve Kurland got him."

It looked like he was about to be famous—except for one thing.

This wasn't Finch Halleck. Those bullets Kurland had taken at Tucson, the battering slugs that perhaps had made a coward of him, told him so. Finch Halleck had triggered them.

JACK TILER came along. Verde City's marshal was a small, trap-mouthed man, grizzled, very competent at his trade—and reserved toward Steve Kurland. Not that Tiler had wanted the sheriff's job himself. Without having stated his reason it was obvious he felt Kurland did not measure up to it. Now he glanced at the dead outlaw, and turned to the gaping crowd.

"Clear out of here. Even a crook deserves some privacy after he's dead. Move!"

Then he swung back to Kurland.

"My jurisdiction. Or do you want to handle the rest of this?"

"No, you can take over," Kurland said. "And one of us had better check on Judson, across the street. He was hit, too."

"Dead—I already looked," Tiler growled. Then: "I kind of expected to find a woman around, who might have been working with this dog. Anybody see her?"

It was a general question, but his attention was sharply fixed on Kurland. Jim Aitken snorted.

"There wasn't any woman. I was there, and I ought to know," Aitken said. "Not another soul on the street. Halleck pulled it alone."

Kurland stood silent. There was a growing hunch in him about that woman. He wanted to verify it himself.

Tiler shrugged and turned, starting to move back to the street. Aitken got in front of him, saying something about Judson's money. Tiler elbowed him aside.

"The territory says Kurland is top law in this town; if he says he's keeping the money, he's keeping it. And if you don't like it that way, go complain to Santa Fe, not me!"

Kurland shoved the outlaw guns under

his belt, picked up the satchel and started out of the alley. Jim Aitken got in his way, wearing a bellicose scowl.

"Judson signed his claim to Green Valley over to me—and I'm moving cattle into it tomorrow," Aitken said. "Ki Stamper will either have to buck me or eat all the hard talk he's been making. And if he tries fight, you're going to stop him!"

"If either of you tries fight, you'll get stopped," Kurland said. "Aitken, you'd better hold off until the question of Stamper's west line is legally settled."

"Hold off, hell! There isn't any question!" Aitken snapped. "His spread doesn't include that valley mouth, and never did. You've been prowling the Temescals, and not because you like to look at hills. You were checking Stamper's west boundary. And unless you've got your hand in his pocket, you damned well know he's lying when he claims I'll trespass on his land if I try to use that valley grass!"

Kurland studied him coldly. He didn't care for Aitken—the man was new in this country, a tough, aggressive, unpleasant sort, out to run a shoestring into a beef empire. If Aitken could get his stock into Green Valley he would be well on his way, too—and Ki Stamper would be ruined. Stamper's own fault—and Ki wasn't any more lovable than Aitken. Kurland was in the middle, bound by his job to keep them from a bloody, head-on clash.

He said, "I'll take an apology for that last remark, Aitken. We'll go on from there."

"Well—I apologize, then. Now, just where did you find that boundary marker?"

"Ask Judge Marsh, after I report to him," Kurland said. "I was acting on his instructions."

He headed back along Trinidad, leaving Aitken dark-faced and swearing harshly. The barber had joined the crowd still milling about the alley; however, there wasn't time now for the bath and shave Kurland had planned. He swung into saddle and gigged his horse along First, toward the courthouse. He had to put the satchel of money in his safe, and then find Judge Marsh.

It was not difficult to trace the woman. She had arrived on the train from the north at four this afternoon, and Verde City's one hack driver had taken her to the Chicago House. There she had registered as Nora Darcy for a second-floor room, was in it now.

The desk clerk also told him Ki Stamper was in the bar, and had left word for Steve Kurland to come there the moment he arrived.

Kurland frowned, galled by that peremptory order. He owed his job mostly to Stamper's influence—no doubt of it—but this didn't make him the rancher's choreboy. Instead of going to the bar he turned toward the cigar counter, and surprised the girl there by asking for cigarettes instead of his usual cheroots. As he was picking up the package, an exclamation sounded at his elbow and a slim hand closed over his.

"Steve!" Irene Stamper said. "I've been so frightened about you, all the talk I've heard about that fight tonight—"

Seeing her, relishing her concern, put him in a much better frame of mind. Irene was slender, willowy, dark-haired, with very red lips and great brown eyes.

"Not a scratch on me," Kurland told her, smiling. "And I'm sure glad to find you in town."

Irene made a pretty, rueful face.

"I won't be, in a few minutes—ordered a dress and some things for the dance Saturday night, charging them to Uncle Ki, and you know how he thinks one dress—the one she has on—is enough for any woman. So I must go back to the ranch with him, with a lecture about my extravagance all the way. Steve, did you find the thing—the marker—that everybody is making such a fuss about?"

"Sorry, Irene," he answered regretfully.

"I just can't give out that information yet."

"Well, I know you did," she said confidently, hand still over his, "and everything is going to be all right!" Then she turned to something that seemed much more exciting and important to her. "That dance Saturday—are you coming?"

"Figure to—if I can sign for every dance on your program."

She squeezed his hand, lips parted and eyes dancing. "You be there, Steve, and perhaps you can . . ."

He left her, stepping a little high. Several times lately he had found himself thinking experimentally of Irene as Mrs. Steve Kurland. It was nice thinking—and making it come true was obviously not beyond his reach.

2 Target for Hell

Then he walked into the bar and saw Ki Stamper, sitting at the corner table always reserved for him. Bob Bentley was there, also.

Stamper was a big man hammered into a small frame, ruddy-faced, with a shock of white hair that gave him a benevolent appearance. He was as benevolent as a snapping turtle—tough, tight-fisted with his dollars, his cattle, his grass. He nodded a curt greeting.

"When I'm waiting on you after this, I'll expect you to move faster. Now, did you find my west marker?"

Kurland studied him, jaw tight.

"Ki, Judge Marsh suddenly took a trip to Santa Fe this morning. He'll be gone a week. I don't need any picture drawn to know you arranged that."

"Sure, I arranged it. I'm tired of court wrangles; I want Aitken handled, fast. I want him shoved back, busted, and sent on the run with his tail between his legs! That's your job."

"My job is to keep the peace in this county—to handle Aitken, or you, or anybody else who disturbs it," Kurland said.

"I don't like that kind of talk," Stamper said coldly. "I gave you the star. I can take it away—" He caught himself. "Listen, Steve, you must know, after the looking you did, that Aitken will be guilty of trespass on my land if he tries to use Green Valley. I put up that west marker myself. If I wasn't so lame from where a bronc kicked me last month, I'd have climbed a saddle and taken you to it—but the directions I gave, I don't see how you could miss finding it quick. And if Aitken tries trailing his stringy cows across the boundary of mine that runs right to it, I'm going to smash him!"

"Ki, why in the devil didn't you buy the valley from Judson yourself and avoid all this?" Kurland wondered wearily.

"Why should I?" Stamper snapped. "That counter-jumper only filed on it because he thought I'd buy him off—and he thought wrong! All he got for his greediness was a grave—and Judson will have company if Aitken tries taking posession of what he bought!"

Bob Bentley stirred. He had been frowning and squirming ever since Kurland's arrival. Now he spoke.

"Like I always say, leave it to the law and you'll lose your hide, every time. Ki, let's go chop down Aitken right now, you and me, and worry about that marker later!"

This was delivered in a truculent tone as Bentley stood up, hand slapping a gun stuck in his belt, handsome face showing toughness. Kurland stared at him, too taken aback by his preposterous suggestion to say anything for a moment. But Stamper had words for him.

"You talk more fight, with less to back it up, than anybody I ever saw!" he snapped at Bentley. "Go pick up the buggy. Tell Irene we're heading home. And stay away from Aitken, or he'll chop you down!" Bentley left, reluctantly. Stamper shook his

head. "Foreman! Sure wish I'd thought about it more before I handed him that job. But Irene claimed he was smart, and nagged at me. Steve, I want an answer out of you—did you find my marker?"

Kurland pushed back his chair.

"Yes, Ki—and no. That's the only answer I can hand you right now."

He walked out on Stamper, heading again toward the lobby.

This was a complicated bit of business Stamper owned thirty thousand acres in the valley, westward, and ran, roughly, around twice as many cattle as his grass could carry. Like most ranchers of his size, this time and country, he used other grass that he didn't own—in Stamper's case, back in the Temescals; there was no point in acquiring it, since such acquisition would only add to his tax burden. This was smart practice—as long as no one else wanted that free grass.

Aitken wanted it. Or, more specifically, he wanted to bar Stamper from it, break him, and grab Stamper's valley graze when Stamper went broke. It could be done, too—Ki Stamper was rich in grass and cattle, comparatively poor in money. One season of being shut out of the hills could ruin him.

The Temescals ran in a series of precipitous bluffs, all along their eastern reaches, and Green Valley was the only practicable approach to the graze in the hills. Whoever held it controlled that graze. Now, Aitken owned the valley—but he had to get into it before he could keep Stamper's stock out of the hills.

Stamper had foreseen, twenty years ago, the possibility that something like this might be tried against him. He had extended his western boundary so that it ran through the hills just east of the valley. Thus, its actual ownership was of no particular concern to him, since nobody could enter the valley without crossing his lines. In that event, all he had to do was claim trespass and run the invader out.

Judson, finding the valley open grass, had filed on it—to some amusement in Verde City, since he had no access and couldn't even prove up his claim. Then Aitken had come along, and Judson had been in a position to realize a fat profit from his filing fee. Aitken claimed Stamper's west line ran a mile farther east than its generally accepted position, that this left open a free corridor along the base of the bluffs, and that he meant to use it.

The county recorder's plat of Stamper's holdings dated back to '67 and was somewhat vague. The position of that west line rested on a cairn of rocks somewhere in the hills that Stamper himself hadn't seen in a dozen years. An easy thing to find, Kurland had thought, until he saw the soaring bluffs, tangled head-high sage, matted brush that was mostly Spanish bayonet and greasewood, thick enough to hide a hundred such markers. A week ago, Stamper had made a belated move to secure an official court ruling that would nail down his boundary once and for all. Steve Kurland had once worked a transit; Judge Marsh had ordered him to go and find a cairn of rocks.

And he had, too.

Kurland saw Nora Darcy go across the lobby, just ahead of him, rush through the door, and onto the street.

He went after her. She was in a tearing hurry, heading west, almost to the corner of Durango Street already. Kurland lengthened his stride; then he swore anxiously and started to run. There was a man across Durango Street, on the corner, and a sudden move on his part showed a wink of reflected light from somewhere on steel as he lifted a gun.

The girl stepped into the street.

"What happened to you?" she called, to that fellow with the gun. "I was waiting, with the money—"

Kurland swung his arm and knocked her flat, lunged on, and fell heavily himself. The gun blasted and a bullet burned the

air where his head had been a moment ago.

KURLAND TWISTED, trying to draw his .44, but he had landed on his right side, cramping the holster, and in the second or so it took to jerk the iron free two more slugs poured from the other gun, smashing dirt in his face. He felt a freshet-flow of sweat again, hearing their deadly whine, as he came up to one knee.

He swung his weapon, saw only black shadows. Running footsteps sounded for a moment. The man had backed off, then had taken to his heels, on down the street and into an auction corral. Kurland's finger tightened momentarily on trigger, and slacked off. No use shooting, he told himself—nothing to shoot at.

He stood up, kicking the dirt, trying to find the chuck-hole that had twisted his heel, throwing him flat. He hadn't dropped because of fear; damn it, he hadn't!

He walked over to the other corner. No sound at all came to him now; likely, the fellow was threading his way fast through the corral's half-acre litter of junk. He ought to go after him—but there was the woman. Kurland turned back.

She was slapping dust from her skirt, and spoke angrily, "Stop interfering with me!"

"Sorry, but it seems necessary. Somebody wants you buried," Kurland said, taking her arm and turning her toward the hotel.

"He was shooting at you, not me!"

"Not that first bullet. Who is he?"

She shook his hand off. "I don't know! Somebody who spoke through the door of my room, telling me to come here. And leave me alone!"

Kurland took a firm hold. "We're going back to your room."

"No!"

"Either that," he said, "or I'll have to arrest you, for your own safety."

She offered no further resistance, then. He was a real tough lawman when it came to women, Kurland thought chafingly. At her door he went in first, checking the room and a closet, pulling down window-shades before turning up a lamp on the bureau. Then he brought the cardboard box of cigarettes from his pocket.

"We smoke the same brand. Here—have one."

She hesitated perceptibly before accepting, and his hunch about her grew stronger. He said, "Guess you heard about that thief I had to shoot, a couple of minutes after you walked away from the bank—where did you know him before?"

Smoke made her cough.

"No where! If I had, it wouldn't have been necessary for me to come to this—this ramshackle little town!"

"You knew the name he used?"

"Of course, Finch Halleck," she said bleakly.

"And you knew he was going to be in Verde City tonight? You were going to meet him here?"

Nora Darcy stood stubbornly silent. A person of refinement and intelligence, Kurland thought—no outlaw's woman. What had been her relationship with that fellow masquerading as Finch Halleck? She suddenly dropped the cigarette; her face was the color of yeasty dough.

"Meet him?" she moaned. "I was going to—kill him . . ."

Kurland jumped to help her to the bed. Face down, she clutched at the coverlet. He dampened a towel in the wash-basin, and silently offered it. Nora pressed this against her face. She was a very wretched young woman.

He felt like a yellow dog. But it had seemed necessary—to prove his hunch that she was no smoker, and that lighting a cigarette on that bank corner had been agreed on in advance as a signal.

He opened her purse. Inside was the largest roll of cash he had ever seen, an elastic around it, also a small nickel-plated .17 pistol. Kurland held both of them, look-

ing at the girl—and Jack Tiler came in.

The marshal's brows lifted.

"You stick up a bank with that toy?"

Kurland put the money back in Nora's purse.

"She planned to kill Finch Halleck."

Tiler took the small gun.

"Maybe could have, if she'd stuck this right in his face. Does she know yet that the joker with the fancy sixes wasn't Halleck?"

"No. And how did you find out?"

"Well, I never ran across him myself—but I know his kind," Tiler said. "Finch Halleck would never have carried guns cluttered up with all that silver—wouldn't have made a mess out of such a simple hold-up, either . . . Now, tell me how you knew he wasn't Halleck."

"I ran across the real Finch Halleck once," Kurland muttered.

"He put lead in your guts," Tiler said, sounding suddenly sad and tired. "That's why you turned in your badge, down at Tucson. He made you gun-shy, boy. I heard it from there, and I've seen it for myself. And you know as well as I do that a gun-shy lawman is less use than a wheel without spokes."

So now Kurland knew the reason for Tiler's attitude toward him. And what could he say in reply? Maybe those quietly measured words were true. Nora lifted her head, staring at them; she had heard a part, at least, of their talk.

"That w-wasn't Finch Halleck, tonight? Then I still have a chance!"

SHE MOANED and clutched the coverlet again. Kurland patted her shoulder, glad for the interruption. Tiler said, "Girl, I want to know what brought you here. You hit town on the four-ten from the north—from Denver; I've already checked, and learned you live there, with a good reputation. You came here for a room, went out again about dark and started leaning against the front of that bank—"

Scratch your nose in a closet, and Tiler somehow seemed to find out. Kurland said, "You also know somebody took some shots at her and me, a couple of minutes ago at First and Durango?"

"Yes. Know you let him get away, too—but I've half a notion who did it. Miss, you were waiting for somebody to point you out that fellow calling himself Finch Halleck, weren't you?"

She nodded.

"I inherited some money," Nora whispered, "and I've been advertising an offer for months—five thousand dollars to anyone who would lead me to Halleck. People thought it was crazy of me—thought he was dead . . . but I knew different. I got an unsigned letter two days ago in Denver, saying Halleck would be here tonight, for me to stand in front of that bank with a cigarette until someone came along to light it, that Halleck would be pointed out, providing I had the money ready to hand over—"

Both men stepped back.

"Sounds crazy enough to be true," Tiler muttered.

"It is true," Kurland said. "I saw her with the cigarette, talked to her—and probably scared off the fellow coming to collect the five thousand. It wasn't three minutes later that the shooting started."

"Aitken and Judson wrangled all day about the price for Green Valley," Tiler said. "They didn't close the deal until after seven. But the jasper who wrote this girl must have known at least four days ahead of time—it was that far back the letter must have been sent from here—that a gunnie would be waiting to grab the money from Judson when he came out of his store about seven-thirty!"

"Aitken was doing some wild shooting with that .38 he packs," Kurland said. "He tried to shoo me up Trinidad, though he must have seen the fellow run into the alley. Maybe Aitken wanted him to get away—to be relieved of that fifteen thous-

and by somebody waiting to knock him over."

"Yeah," Tiler agreed. "Aitken had to borrow that money, at high interest. Getting it back, after grabbing title to Green Valley, would have given him a big boost forward in his fight with Stamper."

"One of Aitken's gun-tramps could have been primed to grab the girl's money, then kill that hold-up artist—which would mean Aitken wrote the letter to her!"

"It's a fair theory," Tiler said. "Perhaps the same jasper slung lead at you and the girl. Aitken was the one I had figured as setting that up—strictly a hunch then; now it seems even more likely."

"A fast try for her five thousand—and the girl left dead," Kurland growled. "I think, too, a bullet was notched for her if a meeting had taken place on that bank corner. Same reason both times—so she'd never do any talking."

"Maybe," Tiler said. "Now, I've got to get busy, and if she has any more answers I want them."

They turned to Nora Darcy again. She was asleep, head turned, hugging a pillow, looking very young.

"She's worn out," Kurland said. "And we've got enough to go on for now. Let her rest a while."

Tiler said, "All right. I'll set my night boy, Lew Priest, to watch her door, see she stays put and that nobody gets in."

Downstairs, that two-seat spring buggy was at the front door. Ki Stamper was sitting in back, and Bentley was handing Irene up beside him. Irene smiled and waved to Kurland as the rig rolled off down the street. Bentley gave him a truculent look. They would drop Irene off at Stamper's big house, Kurland thought, then keep rolling, sided by Stamper's crew—to Green Valley.

Charley Pursell, Tiler's other deputy, came along. Tiler spoke to him, "You find any sign in that corral of the fellow who shot at Kurland?"

"Nope. Checked on Aitken—he pulled out for his place about eight, with his bunch, including some new toughnuts he hired today."

Pursell moved on. Tiler slanted a look at Kurland.

"This whole thing is tied in with that fight over Green Valley—which is beyond my jurisdiction, so that if anything is done there it's up to you. Seems to me one word could settle that tangle and maybe clear this up, too—the location of the marker you went hunting. The way you put off Aitken and Stamper both—I asked them, and found out—I guess you couldn't locate it."

Kurland shook his head.

"Wrong guess, Tiler. And since you've got the only tight mouth in town and somebody else ought to know—I found a marker. It lets Aitken into Green Valley without trespassing on Stamper's grass."

"But you didn't tell Aitken that, so there's a burr under your belt," Aitken said. "What is it?"

"I also found where the marker that Stamper claims once stood. Nothing can be around for twenty years without leaving some sign. It had been torn down. And it closed Green Valley so Aitken couldn't get in."

"The law recognizes only a marker that's standing," Tiler said slowly. "So now all you've got to do is find out who tore down one pile of rocks and put up the other one—and make him admit it."

"Yes," Kurland agreed, with a grim nod. "I was planning to ask Judge Marsh to give me some more time. But it looks like between now and dawn is all I'm going to get."

3 Save Your Bullets!

Crowding midnight, he unlocked his office, which opened directly onto the walk on the ground floor of Rufino County's

small courthouse. He had done some hunting for the fellow who had shot at Nora, a fruitless chore. Now the moment was near when he had to start for Green Valley.

He scratched a match, pulled down his ceiling lamp, and fired the wick. He had to pick up a rifle here, some shells. A calm bass voice behind him murmured, "Not too much light—and keep your hands high until I lift your gun."

Kurland stood rigid, all the nerves of his body instantly like taut fiddle-strings. Nora Darcy had told him plainly, he remembered, and he hadn't paid attention.

"So the story about you being dead was all wrong?"

"Yeah," Finch Halleck said. "Got tired of the game and spread that yarn about myself, burying a jasper under my name to back it up, so I could quit. But damned if I could stand that fool with those fancy guns running around the country, pretending he was me!"

Halleck was a big graying bulldog of a man, dew-lapped and seam-faced, with cold gray eyes. As Kurland faced around, the outlaw studied him thoughtfully.

"Sheriff here now, huh? Thought you'd have had enough of law-riding, after what I did to you at Tucson."

Kurland stood silent. Here was the man who had come within a hair's breadth of killing him, who had dealt him about as much pain as anyone could stand—and who had put in him a nagging doubt of himself. Remembering Halleck's scalding bullets, remembering that twice tonight he had been unable to stand up to guns blasting at him, Steve Kurland pondered the question: Had Halleck turned him into a coward?

The outlaw picked up one of the silver-mounted sixes from Kurland's desk and balanced it appraisingly.

"Nice weapon, even with these gauds," he commented. "But imagine any man in the trade packing irons with his initials on them! Of course, the clabber-head who had them made didn't overlook a single trick to make the world think he was me—and to scare people into making his job easier."

Halleck himself had only one gun, a plain-handled old Colt .45.

"I didn't mind, at first," he continued. "Figured the fool would get chopped down fast, like a couple of others who did the same thing. But luck was with this one; he stayed alive, and turned out such a damned bungler I couldn't stand it. His last try, at Van Horn, was the worst. In full daylight he prances into a one-teller bank, yelling he's me, waves these sixes, shoots out some glass, hits a woman in the neck, grabs a fistful of bills and runs like a rabbit—"

Halleck spat indignantly.

"I made myself a name—and there was that swill-gut throwing mud all over it! Had me a nice ranch in Utah, but I left it and got on the idiot's trail."

"You almost caught up with him," Kurland said.

Halleck nodded.

"I was in El Paso, tapping all the contacts I ever knew to find him, when he did that Van Horn job. There was a fellow from Verde City around, hunting somebody to lift a piece of cash, promising a fifty-fifty split in a funny kind of hold-up, and that joker who advertised he was me took it on, but I found out too late to grab him. I hustled here in a hurry, got in on the eight o'clock train from the south to hear you knocked him over. Guess that proves what a fiddle-foot he was—you doing it."

"You get a look at the fellow from Verde City hiring for the hold-up?"

"No. Queer deal, from the gab I've heard about it here. Looks like the jasper dragging my name in the dirt was due for a fast shuffle out just after he grabbed the money—by the one hiring him, I'd say, to avoid making any split at all. Guess he was somebody so well-known to the fellow getting stuck up that he didn't dare try handling it himself."

"Maybe," Kurland said. "I'm hunting him."

"That so?" Halleck said, a jeer in his voice. "I'd let it lay, if I was you. Fact is, I'd take off that star and the gun you're packing. I heard about you, Kurland, after our Tucson business. You took a long time getting well—and you turned in your badge. You receipted for three in the guts, where I always put them, and a man just isn't the same again, after that happens. You better quit before you get in another fight—because if you don't, remembering how those slugs felt in your belly is going to turn your hand shaky, and you'll wind up buried."

Footsteps sounded on the walk outside. Halleck tilted his head alertly, motioning Kurland to silence. The footsteps passed on by.

The outlaw continued, "Now, I want free of this town in a hurry. And I didn't come to your fancy office just for a social chat. Get out the cash you brought back from that busted try at a hold-up. It's leaving with me."

No chance to get past the big man's gun while he maintained that unwinking alertness—no chance at all . . .

"A nice new safe there in the corner that the county gave you for storing valuables," Halleck said, with a commanding jerk of his Colt. "Spin the dial and yank it open."

"Finch, you'd be smarter to let it go, head back to Utah and play dead again—"

"I'm tired of Utah. Need a new spot, and I've got to have a stake to start on. Move!"

Kneeling, twisting the safe's dial, Kurland wondered if he had only bought himself a bullet, after all. Halleck must have guessed this thought.

"Don't worry, boy," he said. "I heard the marshal here shows up quick when a gun goes off, so you don't draw any slug. Maybe a headache for a couple of days, because I've got to tap your skull to get myself some running time."

Kurland lifted the satchel out and put it on the desk. The loss of this money would undoubtedly mean a new sheriff for Rufino County, with himself possibly behind bars down at Santa Fe. Who would believe his story that Finch Halleck had taken it?

"Open it up," Halleck commanded. "I want to be sure the green is really there."

Kurland wearily obeyed. The money was in neat packets, each with a paper band about it. Halleck grinned in satisfaction. He snapped the satchel shut and lifted it.

"Never got so much before for so little trouble."

For the barest instant his attention was on the satchel, his gun sagging, yawing slightly aside. Kurland went for him.

HE PUT his right fist into Halleck's belly, while his left hand stabbed for the gun, grabbing and wrenching it. The gun hit the floor. So did the satchel, which slid toward the center of the room.

Halleck had been driven back a step, bending a little. Kurland slugged him again, striking for his jaw, but landed high on his cheek. Halleck shook himself and came at Kurland fast and low, a shoulder whipping around, meaning to ram Kurland and drive him off his feet. Kurland dodged this move. He clasped both hands together and smashed them savagely down, at Halleck's head. Halleck careened aside, hit the desk and sent it skidding across the floor away from him. But the contact enabled him to catch his balance.

Kurland was bending to scoop up Halleck's gun. Halleck kicked his right arm, just under the elbow, spinning Kurland but adding impetus to a hasty wicked punch from Kurland's left fist into Halleck's ribs. The outlaw wheezed in pain. Kurland returned the kick, aiming at Halleck's shin, and the man went away at a staggering tangent. Kurland reached again for the gun, and got his hand on it, but his fingers were like sticks, his arm numb clear to the shoulder. He fumbled the weapon away

from him, shifted desperately to his left hand—and saw Halleck, still staggering, jerk off his hat and whip it at the lamp.

His bear-swipe broke the chain and catapulted the lamp across the room, where it smashed against a wall. In instant blackness, Kurland threw a left-handed shot by guesswork at the street door, heard that bang open, heard a high-pitched, startled scream, a curse from Halleck, a slapping sound—and then something hit Kurland, who was driving at the door, hit him hard and solidly, with a whipping rustle of skirts. Streaming hair was in his face, and a scent of violets. He was knocked flat, with a violence that left him very little wind.

Nora Darcy's voice gasped something in outraged protest. Kurland twisted and bucked, throwing her aside. He scrambled up and lunged at the door, slamming through and onto the street.

It was empty and silent. No sight or sound of Halleck; the outlaw had left with panther-like speed and silence.

Kurland turned quickly back. The lamp had snuffed out when it smashed. He snapped a match alight.

Nora, disheveled, indignantly blowing a strand of fair hair away from her face, was scrambling to her feet.

"Must I be knocked flat every time I encounter you?"

He did not answer—was bent low, searching the floor, under the desk, the corners of the room. He stood up, feeling shriveled inside, hopeless. That satchel of cash had vanished with Halleck.

One more shot, he thought, would have resolved all the doubts and fears Halleck had set up in him. And it had been denied him.

The girl's sudden appearance had saved Halleck. This was ironic—but Kurland was in no mood for irony.

Nora's hand touched his arm. She said, "You're not a man to quiver so without good reason. That man made you this way. Who was he?"

Someone was approaching from Trinidad at a run. Tiler, undoubtedly. No time to get rid of her before the marshal appeared, when she would hear anyway. And maybe she had a right to know.

"That was Finch Halleck," he said.

Her lips flattened, her face lost its color. He put out a steadying arm, but she shook her head, stepping back, turning aside.

"I'll be all right, this time." Then, again: "There's still a chance—"

Kurland shook his head. He didn't think so. No chance for her—or for himself either.

Jack Tiler came in a minute later, breathing a little hard, gun out. He holstered it, staring at Nora, who sat now in Kurland's swivel chair, eyes remote and touched with pain as she thought hard about something.

"How in the dickens did she get here?" the marshal demanded.

A nubbin of candle that Kurland had found eerily lighted the scene.

"Walked," he growled. "Somebody tried to get into her room. It woke her up. She left through a window onto the roof of the hotel's First Street porch, got back into a vacant room, down through the lobby, and came here."

"With no street lights in this miserable town I had a terrible time finding you, too," Nora said caustically. "If you hadn't taken my gun, I'd have stayed there and waited for him to kick the door down."

Tiler frowned.

"Must have been the fellow after your money—and Lew must have left his post. I sure don't understand that."

"If you rawhide him for slacking off on his job, add some for me," Kurland said. "If he had stayed there, he might have grabbed that joker—and she wouldn't have run through the door here just as Halleck was going out, wouldn't have got herself slung into me so I was knocked flat. I'd have nailed him sure!"

"I'm sorry about that," Nora said. "I'll never be able to tell you how sorry I am."

"Wait a minute!" Tiler said. "What are you two talking about? Back up and start over!"

Kurland told him, shortly. Tiler's eyes began to gleam.

"Finch Halleck—in my town!" he said tigerishly. Then he shook his head. "But he's likely miles away by now, whipping the hide from a fast horse."

Kurland nodded bitter agreement. Halleck gone—and his doubts about himself unresolved. The outlaw symbolized everything that plagued him; if he could only have nailed the man. . .

"I'll find Lew and Pursell and we'll start looking, though," Tiler continued. "You'll have to see this girl safe some place. I've no time for that."

"Give my gun back, and I'll be all right," Nora said.

"No. I'll figure something out for you," Kurland told her.

"And then start for Green Valley?" Tiler asked. "You done anything yet about lining yourself up some deputies?"

Kurland shook his head.

"I've been too busy with the squabble over Green Valley, since my appointment, even to think about that."

"I can lend you Pursell."

"Forget it. I'll make out."

"If talk will do," Tiler said. "If there's any gun work, though, I'm afraid it'll be different."

"Halleck was the man who ran from here, not me," Kurland snapped, his eyes blazing angrily.

"Boy, I saw the dust down your front after that alley fight. You had to hit your belly before you could open up. And I see that, too." Tiler pointed. Above the street door, nine feet or so from the floor, was a bullet hole. "You knew there was only one way out of this room, knew where it was—and you couldn't hold steady on him. How much proof do you need?"

Kurland said nothing. After a moment Tiler shrugged and left.

NORA DARCY had been watching and listening, eyes wide, lips parted. She spoke indignantly.

"That little man almost openly said you're afraid to face a gun. Why did you let him?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"How do you know I wouldn't? My father was a peace officer. I've known men who turned gun shy. And you don't have the scared look of one who has."

"Thanks," Kurland said. He looked around. "Maybe you might stay here." Two barred windows, and it would take a battering ram to knock his street door down. It was probably the safest place in town for her, outside of an inner cell in Tiler's jail.

"If you say so," she agreed. Then: "What happens to you, with that money gone?"

"The county will have to make it good to somebody—Judson's heirs, I suppose. I assumed responsibility for it."

"That won't be very good for you, will it?"

He grunted wryly.

"Not any good at all. I wasn't elected to this job, but appointed by the county commissioners when the old sheriff died. I can be kicked out as fast as I was put in. I might even be accused of taking the money myself."

"Let them try!" Nora cried. "I'll tell them—"

She stopped abruptly, frowning. Kurland knew what she was thinking. "You didn't see him or see the satchel."

"I'll say I did!"

Somehow, without exactly knowing why, he felt less depressed.

"Nora, how far did you go, after I spoke to you in front of the bank?"

"About half a block. I came back and stood in a doorway, watching that bank corner—had been there only a second when the shooting started."

"You didn't see anyone who looked like he might be wanting to light your cigarette?"

She shook her head, and he asked the question that had really been bothering him.

"Why did you want to kill Finch Halleck?"

Nora was silent for so long that he thought she was refusing to answer. A wind was rising outside, bringing into his office odors of sage and creosote bush, stirring her skirt, her loosened hair.

"There is a man in a Denver hospital," Nora said at last. "He has been there nearly three years—was cashier in a bank until, in a hold-up, a bullet hit him in the back. It—was fired by Finch Halleck."

Her voice was level, but tension vibrated in it. She looked at him, and he saw pain in her eyes again.

"He is paralyzed," she said. "And—always in pain."

"What is the man to you?" He didn't want to ask the question, yet he had to have the complete picture.

"We were to have been married," Nora said, "only a week after the bullet was fired. I wanted to go through with it anyway; he wouldn't. He was a good man, quiet, law-abiding. And that day Halleck walked into the bank, he raised his hands and turned his back, as ordered. Shooting him was wanton cruelty."

"Maybe it wasn't Halleck," Kurland said slowly.

"It was! Oh, he didn't name himself, but his build, his actions, tallied with what facts are known about Halleck."

"Why didn't you believe the story of Halleck's death?"

"I went to Wyoming and talked to the undertaker who buried a body bearing Halleck's name—somebody who was small and thin. I heard the description of the man you shot tonight. It sounded like Halleck. I hoped it was. I was ready to pay whoever it was that brought me here. I thought that would bring me some peace at last . . ."

There was something awesome about what she had done—admirable in a way, too, though regrettable. Putting up that money as reward to anyone who could point out Halleck to her, hunting him with a popgun—no wonder people had laughed at her. Yet she had come astonishingly close to her objective. Because he had known pain and anguish himself, Steve Kurland could understand and sympathize with her, while disapproving of what she had tried.

And—give the devil his due. Halleck was a careful workman in his crooked trade. He never wasted a bullet needlessly. It seemed highly unlikely to Kurland that Nora had been hunting the right man.

He shook himself. Time to saddle and start for Green Valley. He turned toward the closet across the room, thinking again of a rifle and shells, and frowned. The closet door had been ajar when he walked in on Halleck—but had it been open that wide?

Nora stirred suddenly, as he took a step toward it.

"I've been wondering about something—"

Irene Stamper interrupted from the street door. "Steve! I'm so glad my hunch you would be here was right!"

She made a charming picture, standing there on the walk, the wind whipping her skirt and hair. Kurland stared at her in astonishment.

"Irene, what are you doing here?"

She glanced at Nora and dismissed the fair-haired girl with a casual flick of her eyes.

"Oh, a wheel rolled off the buggy. Bob patched it up, but we couldn't make it to the ranch, and had to come back. Bob has gone to get a rent rig, Uncle Ki is waiting at the hotel, and—" she dimpled "—I seized the chance for a little more of your company!"

Stamper back in town, an opportunity maybe, to talk him into waiting until the business of those two markers could be cleared up.

"I'll see you to the hotel, Irene—want a word with Ki."

He turned again to Nora, who was sitting quietly. She had given Irene a thoughtful inspection, something of which he had been aware, but he couldn't guess her reaction. Strangely, Irene's cool dismissal of her had somewhat ruffled him.

"Wait here," he said, to Nora. "Bolt the door from the inside. I'll return soon."

"Don't worry about me. I'm really quite good at taking care of myself," Nora said. Then her voice lowered, words for himself alone: "And you remember what I said. Tiler is all wrong in what he thinks about you!"

4 Face Fire—and Freeze

The wind was half a gale. Irene had to snug her skirt with both hands, while her hair rioted like a banner. She laughed, pressing against him.

"Take my arm, Steve, or I'll be blown right off the walk!" Then: "Who is that girl?"

"Someone in trouble," he answered abstractedly. Nora's last words to him were still in his thoughts.

"A rather pretty thing," Irene said. "A little dowdy—gray doesn't become her. But pretty. I shall have to keep a sharper eye on you!"

The laughing note was still in her voice. It was the half-amused, confident dismissal of a possible rival by a woman who was wholly certain of her own overwhelming appeal. Kurland frowned. He did not think Nora dowdy at all, and his opinion now was that gray became her very well. He considered these suddenly formed opinions in surprise.

"Steve," Irene said, "you did find that marker, didn't you?"

They had reached the corner of Trinidad. It was a very dark night, as dark as any he had ever seen, with the lights at the Chicago House lobby faint sparks in the blackness ahead.

"Irene, I've already said I can't tell you."

"Oh, stop being so secretive!" she flared, in sudden anger. "If you did any looking at all, you must have found it. And I'm tired of you putting me off—"

A sudden incredible possibility occurred to him. He gripped her arm tightly.

"You know something about that marker! What is it?"

"You're hurting me!" she cried.

"Sorry." He released her. She backed away from him a couple of steps, heedless now of her rioting skirt. She said, "How would I know anything about it? Except that—well, it must put Green Valley inside Uncle Ki's boundaries! I'm sure of that."

"Stop talking." Kurland said.

The urgent snap of his voice instantly silenced her. She came close to him, crowding the suppleness of her body against the coiled rigidity of his.

"Steve—what is it?"

Head turned, tautly listening, he did not reply. There was the roar of the wind, and the sound made by her snapping skirt, the whisper of her hair in wild disorder. Also, a flapping shutter, the rattle of an empty barrel rolling aimlessly. And something else . . .

Blackness in the street behind, with a faint haze of stars above it, and darker massings of shadows under awnings along the walk. *Someone there, trailing them—someone,* he thought, *now standing silently in a doorway.* Kurland's gun was out, his fist tight on it. He saw a shift of movement, something incautious or perhaps even taunting, and he heard a ghostly whisper of a chuckle. The sound brushed an icy feather along his spine.

"Irene, go ahead," he said quietly. "Walk fast. Don't stop and don't look back. Move!"

She obeyed him.

He was damnably exposed, here on this

corner—yet still alive, still unchallenged, something he couldn't understand until he remembered the gun he had picked up off the floor in his office and put in a desk drawer. *Halleck's gun.* He said, "Finch, come on out! I've got you centered."

The words sounded thin, instantly whipped by the wind. No shifting shadow was there now, nothing at all he could spot with certainty. He swore at himself for being a spooked old woman. Nevertheless, he backed across Trinidad, and did not turn until he was well along the far walk. Irene, ahead of him, was scurrying into the hotel.

He had been wrong, Kurland told himself. He must have been wrong. There was nothing at all to hold Finch Halleck in Verde City. But the coldness persisted as he turned in at the Chicago House.

The bar was closing. A puncher in rough range gear brushed against Kurland, leaving in a hurry, his manner furtive. Ki Stamper was lighting a cigar in the lobby, talking to Irene, who was nervously patting at her disheveled hair. Stamper nodded casually to Kurland.

"Got an ache in my bad leg, and decided to stay the night in town. Like you said, let the law decide where that boundary runs—"

Kurland felt a flood of relief. He said, "You told Bentley yet?"

"Yeah. He's having a last drink in the bar."

"I'll see you in the morning, Steve," Irene called, turning toward the stairs, hurrying up them.

Stamper sat down in a lobby rocker, reaching toward a stack of newspapers, and began leisurely to scan one, putting a cloud of smoke about his face. Kurland glanced toward the bar; he felt like a drink himself, but decided against it and went out again.

It took rather an effort to walk back the way he had come, even with his burden of worry over Stamper and Aitken lifted. Something bothered him briefly—one glance from Stamper's eyes, back in that lobby, with a gleam in them as tigerish as the glint in Jack Tiler's. Kurland shook himself. The notion Halleck had been behind him, moments ago, had him spooked about everything. Stamper could get in no trouble. Aitken had left town at eight, Charley Pursell had said so. And Halleck was long gone, also. These things were certain.

Kurland stopped at the corner of Trinidad and First again, looking across to where nerves and imagination had led him to believe Halleck was nearby. Somebody moved at him, suddenly and fast, from behind—a man who had been standing in deep darkness against a wall. Kurland whirled, hand stabbing at his .44. A gun muzzle rammed him hard, just above the belt buckle.

"Damn you!" Jim Aitken said. "It's time for a showdown!"

STEVE KURLAND'S hand fell away from his gun. The nudge of iron against his stomach—with remembrance of the terrible smashing power of the slugs that had hit him there before—held him as though he were in a vise.

Angered by the shaken thinness of his voice, he said, "Take your gun off me, Aitken!"

The man swore in astonishment.

"Kurland! Thought you were somebody else. What are you doing here? I figured you'd be halfway to Green Valley!"

There was mingled anger and exasperation in his voice, but he held his gun steady, and after a moment spoke again, now with sudden elation: "This is a turn of luck! Take my gun off you? The hell! You're going with me—and tell me something."

The wind howled harder. Kurland stood like a statue. Aitken laughed contemptuously.

"You'll be no trouble at all," he said.

"The gab from Tucson about you turning chicken-hearted must be right! Start walking—that way."

Then he made the same mistake Halleck had made, relieving Kurland of pressure for a second as he pointed up the street with his gun.

Kurland's hand lashed at the weapon, trying to pin it against Aitken's side. The man yelled, showing brutal strength, almost bringing the gun to bear again as he pulled trigger, blasting a shot. Burning powder-grains peppered Kurland's face. The gun's flash blinded him momentarily, but he threw his free fist and tagged Aitken, driving him across the walk, into the street.

Then another gun started banging with somebody yelling wildly, bumping hard against Kurland and slamming him into a hitchrail. He had his own gun out, but it was jolted from his hand. He bent to scoop the iron up as this interloper ran after Aitken, pulling trigger again with another excited yell. Now Kurland knew him.

"Bentley, you damned fool, stop that!" he shouted angrily. "And come here!"

Bentley obeyed with reluctance.

"Saw right off you needed help—nearly tagged him, too! He ran up Trinidad. Come on, Kurland, we'll catch him quick!"

Kurland tamped down irritable anger as his opinion that Bob Bentley was a brainless loudmouth rose another notch.

"Bentley, head for wherever you're spending the night, and stay there."

"Aw, now, listen! I'm plenty savvy at gun work. Besides, I missed the excitement when you got Halleck, and I want a piece of this!" He added, as afterthought, "Who in blazes was that joker just now, anyway? I couldn't see him so good."

He hadn't seen him at all, Kurland thought, the way he had been throwing lead wildly in all directions. It was a relief that Bentley hadn't identified Aitken. And likely his show of truculent anger in the bar a while ago was now explained. Bentley was just one of those who rammed heedlessly into fights. It was an inexplicable wonder that Aitken hadn't killed him.

"Get off the street," Kurland said. "Go on—move!"

Bentley swore with petulance, backing reluctantly away.

"Can't see why you won't let me side you. I'm pretty good when it comes to a fight!"

Kurland doubted that he was pretty good when it came to anything. He watched until Bentley turned in at the Chicago House, then stood a moment, chewing his lip indecisively. Perhaps, he thought, he should follow along, stay with Stamper, wait . . .

"Damn it, no!" he said aloud. Aitken had started this. Follow him or quit—he had no other choice.

The man had spoken of going somewhere—a place, likely, where his riders were waiting, some spot where they wouldn't attract attention. Aitken had been afoot, so it couldn't be far. Kurland thought of the town, picked the one place that seemed more probable than any other, and started walking also.

His bet paid off. It was an abandoned barn and corral, once a stage station, half a mile past the spot where Trinidad ended. Horses lined a sagging pole fence, with the cigarettes of waiting men like dancing fireflies. Aitken's men—and Aitken himself was yonder in the corral beside a small fire whipped by the wind, talking to someone. Kurland could hear the boom of his voice, though the words were indistinct. He couldn't get closer along the fence; those men were in the way. He circled wide and went into the barn, through a partially-opened door hanging drunkenly on broken hinges.

There was a smell of moldy hay, mingled with rotting harness, and the blackness there was something he could almost squeeze in his fist. Kurland resisted the impulse to risk a match. He moved forward with a hand sweeping out before him, bumped into a stall's sideboards, worked

around them and on to the wall nearest the corral.

He felt along it and couldn't find a door, though he thought there must have been one. Aitken's voice suddenly became audible.

"—got tired waiting for you, went hunting and bumped into Kurland—thought he was you. Good thing he wasn't. I was plenty sore. Why, damn it, you've nearly ruined everything for me! You promised I'd get that fifteen thousand back, and the girl's roll besides. Then you saw Kurland talking to her, you started backing and filling, and you weren't in position to stop that thief you hired at El Paso when he hotfooted it away from Judson's. If it wasn't for Kurland, my cash would be gone for good."

There was a mutter of response, too low for Kurland to catch, though the sound indicated the other was defending himself. Who in the devil was he?

Aitken interrupted him.

"The hell with reminding me about that marker! No matter where it stands, a lot of good it'll do me if your other fumbles aren't cleared up!"

A HORSE stamped and blew gustily in the barn, and Kurland started. Then he realized that somebody had left his mount in here—maybe Aitken. He continued hunting vainly for a door, found a crack and put his eye to it as a puncher came to face Aitken.

"Jim, those new fellows are getting edgy, what with the way Ed Cluff hasn't come back from town."

"I sent Cluff to check on Stamper. Maybe he's in trouble," Aitken said. "Get going, and look for him. I'll follow along. Our friend here opened the ball by putting Priest, Tiler's heeldog, out of the way. Keep your eyes peeled for that other deputy, and Tiler himself."

The puncher left. Aitken continued, to a man who was a wavering shadow by the fire, back toward Kurland.

"Now, I've got to have that fifteen thousand! I had to sign a twenty-four hour call note to get the money, and if the note isn't met tomorrow I'm a pauper."

The sound of hoofbeats came from horses heading toward town, and the wind drowned the next exchange between Aitken and his companion. Then Aitken's voice boomed again:

"—meant to waltz Kurland here and shake the combination of his safe out of him. Then that shooting started and I backed off—thought it was Tiler coming to side him. Might have another chance to make Kurland talk. If not, we'll have to blow the box open. Either way, it's got to be done before daylight, but I want Stamper tallied first!"

They were both moving away toward the corral fence. Kurland scratched wood frantically, still hunting for a door. He felt at last for a match, and found he had none.

"Yeah, a quick bullet for Stamper," Aitken said, distantly. "And we can't stop with him. Got to have a couple of days with no law in town or county, nobody around to dispute that marker—and Kurland knows there's something queer about it. Give me that much time, I'll peg the hill graze down tight. After that, scooping up Stamper's spread will be easy. So—it's Stamper, Tiler, Kurland—all three, tonight. Suits you? Thought it would."

Another horse headed toward town. This meant one man left behind, to come for the waiting animal yonder. Kurland lifted his .44, with the taut hope it would be Aitken.

This was a wicked scheme he had overheard. But only Aitken, with his savage greed and driving energy, could hold it together.

The door he hadn't been able to find rasped open. It was at the end of the barn. Footsteps came through. Kurland let the man go on by, then said, "Hold it. I've got a gun on you—"

He heard a grunt of surprise and sudden desperation, an abrupt fast clatter of boot-heels. The man came straight at him, moving backward and moving fast. He crashed into Kurland and slammed him with violence off his feet.

He twisted as he hit, swinging his gun, hunting a target and finding none. The other was running. Kurland scrambled up and went after him. The wind rose to a monumental roar, shaking the loose roof of this old barn. A gun flashed and stopped him for a moment, though the bullet seemed to come nowhere near. Then he fired in return, but too late to center the powder-blaze he had seen.

He ran again, hit a post head-on, caromed from that into a tangle of old ropes on the ground and thrashed free as the horse squealed. The man was in saddle, heeling savagely. The animal hit that front door and crashed through. Kurland followed, seconds too late. Above the thunder of the wind came a fast run of hoofbeats.

The gun jerked convulsively in his fist. He slammed it with bitterness back into leather. *Face fire and freeze*—with a stomach-tightening constriction of muscles that remembered with dread the smash of lead slugs. He started back to town.

That might have been Aitken—or anybody. He just didn't know.

The Chicago House lobby was deserted at this hour, with the clerk absent from his desk. Kurland went quickly up the stairs. He knew the suite Stamper took when he stayed there. Light showed under its living room door. Kurland knocked, but got no answer. He tried the knob, found the door unlocked and stepped into an empty room.

A moment later, Irene came hurriedly from a bedroom, closing the door behind her.

"Oh—Steve! I thought it might be Uncle Ki."

Her eyes dropped; she was biting her lip. He looked away from her.

"Sorry to burst in like this, Irene. I hoped to find Ki here."

"Why, he went out a while ago. I don't know where."

Kurland walked to a window and stared down at the street. Aitken and his bunch were out there, wolves on the prowl—and Stamper also, somewhere alone. Kurland felt time pressing him hard. But he had to spend some of it here.

"It's very late, Steve," Irene said pointedly from behind him.

"I'll go in a minute," he said, over his shoulder. "Irene, I've been doing some fast thinking, putting things together. You see, I did find a marker. I also found where another one had stood, close to a canyon. I think the rocks from the old marker were lugged to that canyon, one at a time, and thrown in. Then the new marker was put up. And who did all that? There's only one answer that makes sense. You did it."

He faced around. She was standing, arms folded, in front of the bedroom door, with the color in her face visibly fading.

"Oh, Steve, don't be silly!"

"Look," he said gently, "you wanted that west line pegged where it would shut Aitken out of Green Valley for certain. But—you put the new marker in the wrong place; it throws the valley wide open to him! I know you must have done it. If Aitken or his men had tried to tear down the old marker and put up another one, they'd have had to cross Ki's grass, and they'd have been noticed sure and driven off. You could come and go as you pleased—the only one with both time and opportunity."

He paused. The look in her eyes told him his guess was right.

"Irene, you're a city girl," Kurland said. "You didn't know that wild country, and you must have got tangled in your directions. You gave Aitken an advantage that he found out about, somehow, and he means to use it. But all you've got to do is admit what you did, and I'll certify that Ki's west

boundary is right where he has claimed it was."

"Steve—" she said, and moistened her lips. "Steve, I—I've got to think—"

Then the door swung open behind her. Bob Bentley stood framed in it—coatless, cigar clenched in his teeth, a glass in his hand.

"Kurland, damned if you didn't pick a poor time to come calling," he said. "Now, we've been enjoying a nice long visit—ever since I saw you last—and you're kind of in the way. Suppose you run along."

The cigar in his mouth was tilted at a rakish angle, and he had a taunting grin on his handsome face. Kurland stared at the man, then at Irene, remembering suddenly what Stamper had told him—that Bentley had been made foreman because Irene had taken a liking to him. But he would never have guessed such liking would go this far. Not Irene . . .

There was a hot, angry stain in her cheeks, now.

"Steve, please— You mustn't think— This isn't what it seems!"

Bentley's grin widened.

"Let him think what he pleases." And added pointedly, "So long, Kurland."

"Sure." Stamper being stalked in the black night, while this pair dallied heedlessly here—he was glad to go. And it was abruptly of vast unimportance who had put up that marker, or how it had happened. But, at the hall door, he paused. "Aitken and his bunch are back in town."

Irene had taken a step toward him, was starting to say something more. Now she cried out, hand to her mouth. Bentley swore explosively.

"I'll be right along."

"Do as you please," Kurland said. "But not with me."

And Kurland wheeled around rigidly, his face a cold mask, flung the door open and strode out. At the top of the stairs he paused, thoughtful, and then slowly descended.

5 A New Courage

Downstairs, the night clerk was back at his desk.

"Sheriff, I saw you with Miss Darcy, earlier. A telegram just came for her, but she isn't in her room. I'm kind of worried."

"Give me the wire," Kurland said. "I'll see she gets it."

Jack Tiler came in from the street. He was grim, taut.

"Priest is still missing," the marshal said. "And somebody bushwhacked Pursell, put a bullet in his leg."

"Aitken's work," Kurland said, and told what he knew. Tiler listened, head bent. "You had Aitken and that other joker cold, and let both of them get away?" he said quietly.

Kurland stood silent. No use telling of the hunt for the door in the barn that he couldn't find. And perhaps Tiler was right in what he was probably thinking—that he had lacked the guts to slam in and wind up the whole business at the corral. Kurland didn't know.

Tiler sighed, squaring his shoulders.

"Better get to your office and wait, boy. I'll handle this."

Kurland did not go to his office. Instead, he took to the dark streets of the town, conducting his own search for Ki Stamper, trying to figure where the man had gone, why he had left the hotel. And, after interminable fast-flying minutes of finding nothing—no sign of Stamper, or Aitken and his bunch, either—he was working along an alley behind Santa Fe Street, where most of Verde City's saloons were located, when he heard a startled stir and unmistakable click of a gun-hammer being eared back, just ahead of him.

Kurland's .44 flashed into his hand as he hugged the rear wall of the Palace Bar. There was a rustle under an overhang where the Palace unloaded liquid goods—

another sound that could be made by only one thing—a woman's skirts. She came out of inky shadows, making hardly any further noise, closed a hand on his arm and rose on tiptoe, cheek brushing his as she put her lips against his ear. Nora, again.

"Thank goodness I remembered the way you put your heels down!" she breathed. "I nearly shot you!"

He took the gun she held, one of the silver-mounted sixes.

"Why did you leave my office?"

"Shh! A man tried to get in, while I was there. I had a glimpse of him, going away again. It was Halleck!"

Again that touch of an icy feather along his spine. He grunted in disbelief.

"Don't tell me I'm mistaken—or that I think every man I see is Halleck!" Her cheek was velvety. He regretted the prickly quality of his own. Nora hurried on, in her breathless whisper. "I lost him in the dark. But I think he is stalking me, now."

The wind, which had died down a little, was rising again. Kurland had listened in amazement to Nora's recital. At her last words, he clamped a hand on her shoulder.

"Where?"

"Around the corner of that passageway, straight ahead. And keep your voice down; that's why I've been whispering. I was just about to go in there and see who is there, when you came along."

Kurland dropped his hand to her waist and swung her behind him. The passageway she meant, where the Palace stacked empty beer barrels, ran up to the street. It took him four strides to reach it. He dropped to one knee and took a quick, cautious look, then backed up and stood again.

Nora breathed, "Well?"

The saloons had closed at two; it was as silent here now as across the tracks. He reached out and pulled her close, lips against her ear this time.

"Somebody there, all right. Wait here. I'm going in after him."

He slid into the passageway. It was narrow, scarcely an arm-span wide, and cluttered. But he had an unexpected break; some swamper had swept saloon sawdust into it, and he made very little noise.

He had no time to think again of walking into darkness against a possible blazing gun, for Nora had disobeyed his order and was right behind, treading on his heels. Kurland halted, putting back an arm to stop her. Either he was acquiring cat eyes, or the night was breaking early; light was coming from somewhere. Then he saw a night lamp burning in a pawn shop window, across the street. It showed him Ki Stamper's white hair.

The tough little cattleman was behind a couple of barrels, one piled on the other, gun in fist, watching the street with such concentration that he did not hear Kurland and swerve around until it was too late. Kurland tapped his ribs with the .44.

"I want your gun, Ki."

"The hell!" Stamper rasped. Then: "Who's that with you? Not Irene—"

"No," Kurland said. "Give me your gun and come along."

"Listen to me!" Stamper said, breathing hard. "I know Aitken and his bunch are hunting me. One of his gunnies, fellow named Cluff, told me the news at the hotel. And I'm going to get Aitken first. He's got to come by on that street sometime tonight, show himself plain—"

"Or come in here, the way we did, and kill you," Kurland said. He stabbed out his hand, clamped it on Stamper's weapon, and wrenched the iron from the old man's fist. "Aitken's going to be finished at daybreak—and I'm going to see you safe from him until then."

"He won't be finished until his toes are pointing up!" Stamper snapped. "Give me back my Colt before I rip the star off you!"

"We're taking a walk, Ki," Steve Kurland said. "Back to the alley, first. Let's go."

Stamper swung a punch at him, creakily.

Kurland parried the blow. Nora whispered, "Be quiet, both of you!"

ACROSS THE street, silhouetted by that night lamp, a couple of men had appeared. They stood together, looking both ways along the street. A third joined them, and they held a conference, voices beginning to rise. Then all three fell silent as Jim Aitken came along. He said something harshly to the trio, stabbing a forefinger that pointed toward the other side of town. Aitken, fretted by lack of success in finding any of the three men he wanted, was obviously riding a razor.

Nora breathed a frantic warning and sneezed, an explosive sound in the night stillness.

Aitken whirled instantly, gun flashing up, a man set on a hair-trigger, certain to shoot at anything. Kurland slammed Stamper against a wall, held him there in spite of the man's furious effort to break free. He yelled at Nora, "Get down!" Aitken chopped a shot, and Kurland drove it back at him. Then it was gun-thunder and puffing smoke, the stink of scorched powder, the hammering thud of bullets, incoherent yells.

Perhaps Kurland held a small advantage, since he could pick and choose among those four, standing with that light behind them, while they were firing at a narrow wedge of blackness and didn't know their target. But they were concentrating all their fire at one spot, and lead came into the passageway like pelting hail. Kurland gave silent thanks for those stout-staved beer barrels. Bullets rang anvil strokes against their iron hoops.

He tried hard for Aitken, but a fog of smoke obscured the man. Kurland saw one of the punchers lurch against a post, hug it for a moment, then leave at a shambling stagger, bent double. Another man went backward over a bench, and crawled away.

Then the street was empty again, with all of them gone. Kurland released Stamper, who cursed him with scorching profanity until Nora, lifting herself from the ground, cried indignantly, "Shut up! He saved your life!" She slapped at her skirt, and sneezed again, and said, "Drat this sawdust!"

Kurland wiped his face, and bent to pick up his gun. He had dropped it, empty, and used Stamper's then dropped that and used the silver-mounted six. No tightening of stomach muscles this time, either. The storm had broken so swiftly there had been no time to think of what might happen to him.

"Let's go," he said.

He led the way to the street, moving with care, but those four had really pulled out, something that greatly puzzled him. Jack Tiler appeared, running, and Kurland told him what had happened. Tiler grunted, looking across the street. Kurland knew what he was thinking—all that shooting, and not one man down to show for it.

"This settles Aitken's hash!" the marshal growled. "I've deputized some help, including that foreman of yours, Ki, and we'll get him."

"Swear me in, Jack—right now!" Stamper said eagerly.

"No!" Kurland said. "Tiler, you take Ki along with you to your jail. Lock him up, an inner cell without windows, where nobody can possibly get at him. Keep him there until morning. Aitken's hash will be settled then, legally. I've got now what I need to stop him cold. Go along, Ki. Aitken isn't the only one gunning for you—and I don't know yet who the other one is that wants you dead."

Stamper cursed him again, with outraged wildness.

"Jack, take this fool's gun and kick him out of town!"

Tiler shook his head, wryly.

"He's top law in Verde City, until the county commissioners decide otherwise. He can lift my badge and relieve me of duty

if I buck him. Come on, Ki." He took Stamper's arm, turning him away. "I've got to do like Kurland says."

Kurland came at a fast walk along Santa Fe Street and stopped beside a hack sitting in a vacant lot. Verde City's hackman, a thrifty man, wasted no money on storage charges.

"All right?" he called.

Nora scrambled out. He had made his order a tough one, this time—stay put, in the one place he could find quick, close at hand, where it was unlikely anybody would look for her. She said, hurriedly, "Steve, I must tell you something—"

He looked both ways along the street, hardly aware of her words, of her use for the first time of his given name. The night was breaking, gray in the east, but it was still an hour until first light. And no sign of Aitken or his men. Their disappearance was something he couldn't figure at all. No sign of Halleck, either—and he remembered now with disgust the way he had spooked twice at the thought the outlaw might still be around.

Halleck had that fifteen thousand. He was long gone. And where in the devil was Aitken?

"Steve, listen to me!" Nora said.

He sharpened his attention on her. Nora's eyes dropped: She was chewing her lip.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I SHOULD be slapped," she said, low-voiced. "So many things happening, I just forgot to tell you—but that's no excuse— I found that satchel, with the money in it."

The wind was still strong. It ballooned her skirt. She pushed it down, and continued, "When Halleck ran into me in the darkness, there at the front door of your office, he put both hands on me. I kept thinking of that, knowing he couldn't have been carrying anything. But the satchel wasn't in the room. Suddenly I knew where it must be, and started to tell you, but that woman came along, and I—I plain forgot about it. After you left, I remembered again. I looked for the satchel."

"It was in the closet?" Kurland said.

"Yes. I think Halleck must have kicked it there, accidentally, running out."

"It hit the door and shoved it a little farther open," Kurland said. "I noticed that and almost looked in there, myself. But Irene came along. Nora, what did you do with it?"

"I tried your safe, and found it wasn't locked. I put the satchel inside."

Kurland dropped a hand on her shoulder, squeezing anxiously.

"Did you close the safe again, all the way, and spin the dial? Did you lock the front door when you left?"

"I couldn't find any key to the front door. I closed the safe, I'm certain of that. But about spinning the dial, I just don't know. Because right then Halleck came back and tried to get in."

So the outlaw had followed himself and Irene, after all, maybe hunting a chance that hadn't come to jump Kurland and grab his gun. Perhaps he had thought Irene was Nora, with that office left empty, and had turned back to the courthouse, because he knew the money was still there. But the door had been bolted from the inside. Kurland could picture the scene then—Nora crouched beside the safe, probably rising and grabbing that silver-mounted six-gun while the man she had trailed so long put his weight against the door. Then she had gone after him when he backed away.

No wonder she could not remember whether she had locked the safe! And he couldn't blame her for that; he felt too much gratitude to her for finding that money again and trying to safeguard it for him. Maybe this showed in his face, the pressure of his hand Nora gave him a sudden wondering smile and reached up to cover his hand with hers.

"Tiler came by here again," she said, "and I told him about finding the satchel."

Kurland turned and went off up Santa Fe Street, almost running. Nora cried out, her feet pattering furiously against the walk as she followed. He stopped contritely, looking back. Nora showed a rush of color in her cheeks, hastily dropping the skirt she had lifted high on handsome legs.

"You're making me a brazen hussy—first forcing me to smoke a cigarette, and now this immodest display!"

He reached for her arm.

"Come along. And if there is trouble, any kind, you get as far from me as possible, as fast as you can!"

"Well, all right," Nora agreed, and lifted her skirt again as his stride lengthened once more. "I'll be a hussy. I've come this far with you, and I've got to see how it ends!"

It might already have ended, he thought grimly. *That safe, open to anybody's pull, probably, in an unlocked office . . .*

And something monstrous was forming in his mind. It coupled two names: Irene Stamper and Jim Aitken. He realized this dark suspicion must have been with him from the moment he had known she was the one who had placed that new marker. Only now he was facing it squarely.

Maybe Irene hadn't made any mistake—maybe she had put the marker right where Aitken wanted it, at his direction. Kurland was remembering Ki Stamper's tightfistedness, his reluctance to spend any money on the girl. She had likely expected a lot, from the county's richest man, might have resented his stinginess with a bitterness that had turned into hatred—and accepted a share of what Aitken hoped to gain, by helping him.

He crossed the railroad tracks with Nora, cut over to Trinidad and up to First, looking tautly ahead to the courthouse. The Chicago House's lobby lights were brightly yellow against the gray dawn. Somebody was coming along the walk from the hotel.

It was Irene. He stopped reluctantly. Nora made some small sound and broke his hold on her arm, stepping back and away.

Irene said, "Steve, I must talk to you. I've been waiting in that lobby for you to come back, and I couldn't wait any longer—"

Something had turned her anxious and fretful. *Perhaps the prod of conscience*, he thought.

"It's all right, Irene. Ki's safe."

"What?" she said. Then: "Oh—Well, I wasn't worried about him. It's something else."

He felt a little sick. This, her lack of interest in Stamper's safety during the deadly night almost past, seemed to confirm the suspicion mounting in him. Nora had drifted away from them, eastward along the walk, her attention fixed on the courthouse across the street. Irene looked toward her, and frowned.

"Really Steve, you're going to cause talk, being in the company all hours of a woman like that."

"Like what?" he said sharply.

6 Lost Courage

She had no chance to answer. Nora cried out, and he whipped around. A man had just left Kurland's office, running into the street. He was only twenty yards or so away, but the light was still too thin to identify him. Kurland lifted his .44. Gunflame winked twice at him, bullets screaming close. They riveted him for a moment, and now he knew it wasn't Finch Halleck. At that distance, firing at a standing target, Halleck just wouldn't have missed.

It was Aitken, then, must be. He had gained the walk on this side. Nora started to back away from him, but too late. The man grabbed at her. There was a flurry of motion, Nora gasping something in breath-

less indignation as she slapped at him. They were in deep shadow under a wooden awning, Nora's face a pale blur. Kurland ran toward them, now fearful for the girl. Another shot blasted at him. He saw Nora break away and throw herself into the street out of the way.

The man seemed to hesitate a second, then turned and went to his right with a rush, heading for vacant lots, high in weeds, on this side of First Street. With Nora clear Kurland pulled trigger, still running, a swinging shot—*wasted*, he thought as it left his gun. He was startled to see the other go down as though he had tripped over a wire, a hard fall, straight forward on his face.

Kurland kept going. He knelt, bit his lip when he saw where his bullet had hit, and turned the man over.

Bob Bentley stared up at him, still alive, but obviously only for a moment or so—and knew it. The satchel was clutched in his left fist.

Kurland felt a rush of weary anger as he realized how blind he had been. As Nora had said, so many things happening. But he should have seen the truth. It should have been apparent when Aitken had mistaken him for Bentley on a street corner. No other man in Verde City last night could have matched Kurland's height, his breadth of shoulders. This seeming oaf, this loudmouth, had been the key to the whole wicked business.

"Bentley," he said, "you got Irene to tear down Ki's old marker and put up that new one."

The man coughed hard, crimson froth bubbling at his lips.

"Yeah," he muttered gratingly. "Aitken couldn't do it, I couldn't— had to use her. Like you said, wild country in those hills, and she's no range girl—took my say-so she was making sure Aitken couldn't get into Green Valley, when she put the marker where I told her. She—nearly blabbed that—in the hotel room. I had to step in, shove her off-balance—drive it out of her head. Fooling around with men—she likes that, liked it with me. It's how I—got her to talk Stamper into giving me that foreman's job—needed it to help Aitken right. But she didn't want—people to know. Especially you. It made her forget—everything else—you finding her and me together—like that—"

Kurland became aware of Tiler, standing beside him, breathing hard.

"A good scheme," Bentley continued, voice weakening. "The joker I found in El Paso to take Judson's dough—went down there hunting him—when I was supposed to be pricing feeders at Tularosa. Knew he wasn't Halleck, I saw Halleck once in Arizona—then me to knock him off and grab the money back. And an extra five thousand—out of that woman from Denver. Read her ad in an Albuquerque paper. A good scheme—and it all went wrong. Because you got in the way, Kurland, at every turn! Damn you—"

There was no more. His trail of deceit was at an end. Kurland stood up.

"Tiler, you got here fast."

"Ran my legs off," the marshal muttered. "I did a damned fool thing—let slip to Ki at the jail that the money there had been put in your safe, with the door likely not locked, and Bentley heard me. He had showed up around two, yammering for a deputy's badge. I handed him one, but told him to wait with the others until I had it set up how they were to be used. He slipped away twice. I ran into him both times, and herded him back."

"Looks like he wanted the badge to shield him when he found and killed Stamper," Kurland said. "He could claim it was an accident."

"Yes," the marshal agreed. "I had just told those deputies they were free to leave, a while ago, when I let my mouth flap too much." Tiler shook his head, bitterly. "This son jumped like a bee-stung pup. I saw it, but was busy figuring whether I

should come straight here or try to find you quick first. It was a couple of minutes before I understood. Then, like I said, I ran my legs off. But he had thirty years on me. He ran faster."

Kurland felt a little better. He wasn't the only one who could make mistakes.

"Bentley was too greedy; he tried to grab Nora's money, too," Kurland said. "Now, about Aitken—"

"Aitken's dead," Tiler said. "Bentley was grabbing for himself, before taking off for yonder. He knew I found Aitken a few minutes ago, nose down in some saloon slops, where he had crawled after that fight with you. His men knew it, too. They've cleared out. It meant the whole business ended, but still a chance for Bentley to pick up all the chips if he moved fast."

"Maybe it's not ended," Kurland said. "There's still Halleck."

"No," Tiler said. "Halleck may have hung around for a while, but he's gone now, with daylight here." The marshal studied Bentley's body. "One slug only—in his back. You want to know now where I found the bullet that finished Aitken?"

Kurland stared at him. "Are you saying I'll back-shoot a man because I don't dare face him head on?"

"I never make that kind of talk, boy," Tiler said gently. "But others will. Two of them, both hit in the same place."

"Confound it, I didn't gun Aitken deliberately in the back—or Bentley, either! And I tagged two of Aitken's punchers—in front!"

"No sign of that," Tiler said. "Give me that money, now. Don't know who gets it, but I'll see it's turned in for safekeeping as soon as the bank opens."

"I'll handle the money," Kurland said.

"Afraid not," Tiler told him. "Two of our county commissioners were at the jail, serving as deputies. At Stamper's request, they fired a sheriff. Take off your star, Kurland—and take off that gun, too, before wearing it gets you killed!"

NORA DARCY came out of the Chicago House carrying two small bags. The hackman stowed them in his rig. Steve Kurland, who had been waiting, awkwardly held out the telegram the night clerk had handed him.

"I've done some forgetting, too," he said. "Hope this isn't urgent."

She accepted it, face going pale. "From Denver. The hospital must have sent it; no one else knew I was coming here."

Then she scanned the message and swayed, and Kurland quickly put out his arm. She leaned against it. He said, "Your —friend?"

"Yes. He's free from pain—forever." She looked up wonderingly at him. "Am I heartless? I'm trying to feel grief for him, but I can't. My tears won't even flow."

"I think that's the way he'd want it." She had probably been wrung dry of grief and tears for him, long ago. Now he could see tension leaving her features, the bitterness memory had put in her eyes noticeably ebbing. "I don't believe he'd want you hunting vengeance for him, either," Kurland said.

"Perhaps you're right. I'll take that morning train back to Denver, and try to forget." Nora took a step away from him, her glance turning thoughtful. "There's a lot of strength in you, for others. I wish you could lend yourself more of it."

He heard his name called, and saw a livery buckboard in the street, Ki Stamper holding the reins, Irene sitting beside him. Stamper showed an uncertain, craggy smile, with a pleading gesture.

Nora murmured, "Please talk to him, Steve."

Kurland nodded and walked slowly across to the buckboard. It was still not quite sun-up, with no traffic on the streets, the walks yet empty. Quietness after violence, all loose ends tied up. Even Lew Priest had been found, head showing a pistol-barrel bump, in a hotel broom closet

where Bentley had dumped him before trying to get into Nora's room. All over, Kurland supposed, particularly for himself. But a sense of uneasiness chafed him. He had the feeling of a job not completed.

Irene had finished saying what had brought her out of the hotel at dawn.

"Steve, you must believe something. Bentley had been with me only a couple of minutes when you saw us together. He forced his way in.—I was so outraged, the impression he gave that I had invited him and he had been there for some time, I couldn't find words to tell you then."

Kurland knew now that Bentley had returned to the hotel from his meeting at the stage corral with Aitken, probably with the thought of finding Stamper there and somehow getting him outside, to be killed in the dark. He had found Irene alone, had dallied there.

Remembering the time involved, Kurland knew he had enjoyed her company more than any couple of minutes. And, studying the uneasy flicker of her eyes, he doubted that it had been necessary for Bentley to force his way in. A woman who liked fooling with men—

Still: "It's all over, Irene, and forgotten. It doesn't matter."

He had meant it. He wasn't presuming to judge her. And he supposed it had been the right thing to say. She showed him a warm smile, now. Or maybe she was pleased by the news that Nora was soon leaving town.

Ki Stamper had a tremor in his hands.

"What Bentley did hit me pretty hard," he began awkwardly. "Guess he was undercutting me every way possible. I suppose he tinkered with that buggy wheel so it would roll off and force me back here for Aitken to knock over."

"Expect so," Kurland agreed.

"And if you hadn't had Tiler stick me in that cell, Bentley could have walked right up to gun me himself."

"Ki, acquire title to Green Valley as quick as you can, so this sort of thing won't ever happen again."

"I'll do that," Stamper agreed, and moistened his lips. "Steve—son—I'm asking you to forget an old man's damned foolishness and put that star back on and keep it there!"

Kurland stood silent a moment. It was an invitation, he realized, to take a good job for as long as he wanted it. Probably an invitation also to become Stamper's kin through marriage, the way Irene was beaming at him.

But last night had sharpened and intensified his personal problem, and until he had an answer to it Kurland didn't think he belonged behind a law badge. It was an answer, he knew, that he might never find. Maybe his own doubts of himself, plus what Tiler had added, would always be with him.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I'll have to think about it."

Stamper looked disappointed, but Irene smiled confidently.

"You'll wear the star again. And I'll see you at the dance Saturday night, Steve. Uncle Ki is buying me the most beautiful dress for it!"

So somebody had gained from last night's murderous business. Kurland watched them drive away. He found himself measuring Irene against the kind of woman he had seen in Nora Darcy, and he knew he would never again think of Ki Stamper's niece as Mrs. Steve Kurland—never again.

Then he turned, and saw the hackman standing alone beside his rig. Kurland said, "Where did the young lady go?"

"Why, a fellow came along, from down toward Trinidad, said something to her, and they started back that way."

Kurland stared at him.

"Tiler?" he asked. The man shook his head.

"Didn't know him, sheriff. Big fellow—face like a bulldog."

KURLAND RAN down the street. No time to think, now, or to feel anything, except the lash of necessity to find them, fast. He rounded the Trinidad corner, and came to a halt.

Here it was ending where it had started, at the bank. Three people yonder—Jack Tiler, the satchel gripped in his right hand, waiting by the door that the bank's president opened at precisely seven every morning—and, several paces this side of him, Finch Halleck, with his hand on Nora's arm.

As Kurland stopped, Halleck gave Nora a shove away from him. He had been forced to bring her here, in his effort to grab both bundles of cash at once. Now she was in the way. Nora stumbled and almost fell, stopping with her back against the bank's side wall.

Halleck had already taken her purse. He shook it open and flipped that fat roll of currency into the air, dropped the purse and caught the roll, all with one swift motion of his left hand. He shoved the money in a jacket pocket, one cool eye on Kurland, the other on Tiler.

"A long night of watching and waiting, Kurland," Halleck said. "Had to find me a fast horse and a good gun, and that took time, with so many on the prowl. Thought I might have missed a trick when I heard gab that satchel was in an unlocked safe half the night, with your front door wide open. But it doesn't matter, now I've got both chunks of cash in one place. They're leaving with me. Don't anybody get a foolish notion they're not!"

"Steve, let him have the money!" Nora cried. "I came with him because he threatened to shoot you."

"Too public, too many people around—he wouldn't have shot me," Kurland said, to be saying something as he started mov-

(Continued on page 113)

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For Hell and Glory They Rode . . .

By BRUCE CASSIDAY

ONE of the most fantastic races in the history of the West started on April 3, 1860, when two raw-boned riders started out—one from St. Joseph, Missouri, and the other from Sacramento, California—to blaze the trail of the first mail route directly across the wild frontier. Between these two starting points 1900 miles apart lay miles and miles of wilderness peopled by hostile Indians, thundering rivers swollen with spring floods, snowbound mountain passes, deserts strewn with the bleached bones of the dead, and horse thieves and road agents who would be tickled pink to do away with the United States mail.

After endless hours in the saddle, and after gruelling miles of hard riding, the first dusty mail pouch came through to St. Joseph. It had taken nine days and twelve hours. This was less than half the time it took U.S. mail to travel by the Butterfield Route through the Southwest. The Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company—the Pony Express—was a success!

As the service got under way, time was cut down to eight days in summer and eleven days in winter—but the dangers of the wilderness increased. It took tough, daredevil hombres to ride the swift Mustangs that comprised the Express—men with guts, muscle, and heart. The normal stretches between relay stations was fifteen miles and the riders were allowed rests of two minutes. Indians constantly menaced them in open country, and road agents harassed them over wild stretches of desert.

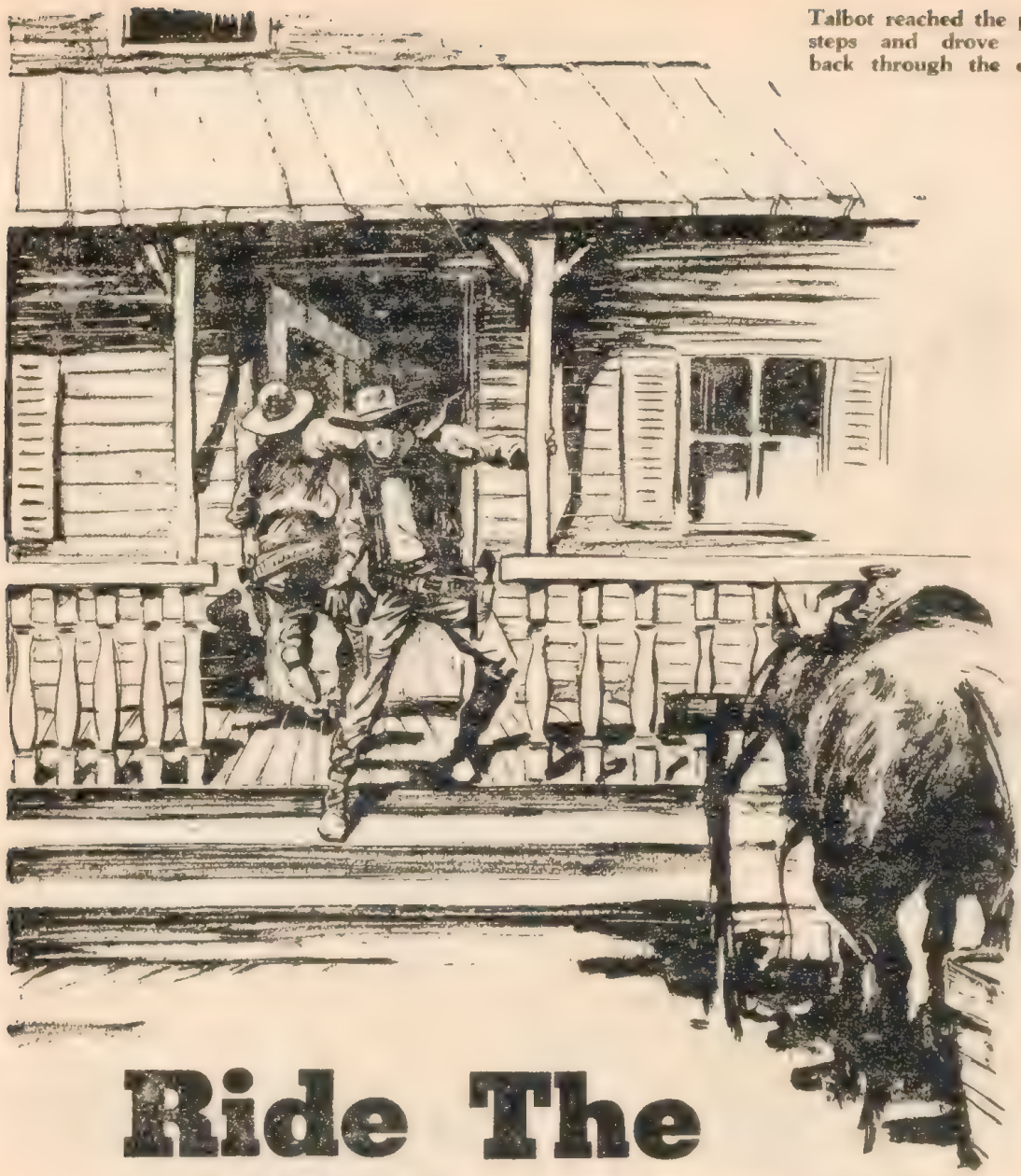
A tough rider named "Pony Bob" Haslam once set out for the first lap of his ride, only to run into an attempted Indian ambush in a wild section of hills. His horse outdistanced the redskins converging on him, and he made the first relay station, his horse winded and exhausted. Wisps of smoke rising from burned-out studs was all that was left of the relay station, and Haslam transferred the mail sacks to one of the relay horses standing forlornly in a meadow. Haslam set out again, through flat, wooded land, and another ambush almost downed him before he made a steep grade and came upon the way station in a protected box canyon. Haslam's blood turned cold. The agents at this station had been butchered. The station was intact, but there were no relief riders. Haslam transferred the mail to a fresh horse, and continued. The third way station was burned out, and the relief riders gone. Haslam rode onto the fourth. Here he found one man, wounded, unable to ride, and demanding attention from him. With a rifle the wounded man held off the Indians through a night of horror, while Haslam rested. With only eleven hours rest, Haslam rode on to the next station where he found relief, and where he gave the news of the Indians' work. In all Haslam covered 380 miles with only eleven hours rest on the way.

In October, 1861, the telegraph closed the gap between East and West coasts, and the need for swift dispatches was over. The Pony Express was disbanded sixteen months after it had begun. But in those sixteen eventful months, it had won a place in the West's hall of fame.

RACE WITH DEATH

"You should have used a bullet when you got the chance, Tal. You ain't gonna get another chance between here and hell!"

By ROE RICHMOND



Talbot reached the porch steps and drove Gaier back through the doors.

Ride The Wild Trail!

TALBOT AWOKE in the night with a dry sour mouth, instantly alert in spite of last night's whiskey. Moonlight rayed into the familiar room, and Old Charley was snoring softly on the bunk across the way. Beyond that he heard nothing out of the ordinary, although it seemed as if some other sound had penetrated his sleep.

He sat up and swung his legs to the floor and reached for the gun on the chair, quietly so as not to disturb the old man. The Sioux were out, but they seldom struck this close to Fort Rawson. There was always some young buck who wanted to be another Crazy Horse, and there were always renegade whites to furnish rifles and firewater

to them. But if it was Indians you didn't hear them until it was too late. There were other menaces in this country. Drifting outlaws or men like Harry Gaier and Leo Lippert. Those two weren't apt to forget what had happened in Hillton, or to rest easy until they'd evened the score. Or tried to.

Talbot got up and moved carefully into the kitchen, needing a drink to ease his swollen tongue and parched throat. The water in the bucket on the sink was warm, but it helped some as he rinsed his mouth and then gulped a dipperful. *Drinking too much lately,* he thought. But a man had to have something when he couldn't get what he wanted most of all. A lonely life out here. Talbot was lucky to have Old Charley Spade and the whiskey, as long as he had lost Sue Mallory. Never would have thought a woman could make that much difference to him. Not to the happy-go-lucky Talbot.

He made the rounds of the interior, peering and listening from one window after another, but there was nothing to be seen or heard. *The liquor's riding my nerves raw,* Talbot decided. *That and the business with Gaier and Lippert, and maybe the fact that I'm pretty much a failure. Running a two-man spread and getting nowhere, while men like my old friend Benners push ahead in the world. No ambition, no head for figures, no hunger for money. But I live the way I like to, do as I damn please, and enjoy myself most of the time. That's worth something to a man. Especially to a lazy, easygoing, independent one like me.*

Back in the kitchen, Talbot laid down the pistol, picked up the pail, and stepped out into the backyard. The dewy grass and cool dirt felt good under his bare feet, reminding him of boyhood, as he crossed to the well and dipped up a pailful of fresh water. *About two o'clock by the look of the stars.* A big night, like everything out here was big, enough to make any man realize his smallness, but it didn't touch some of them. They went on strutting high, trying to throw long shadows and leave big footprints, as if it mattered one way or another in this vast land.

He was scanning the sweep of the starry sky over the barren broken earth, when he heard the sounds of a wagon in the distance. *Slow and heavy, a freighter most likely, a six-mule outfit,* he estimated. *Maybe one of Benner's on the homeward haul to Hillton.* Ben had built himself a good business.

Inside the house Talbot dried his feet on a dirty towel, pulled on pants, socks and boots, and strapped on his gun belt. Gaier and Lippert worked for Ben, and they might be on that rig coming to pay him a surprise visit. Talbot shrugged into a short denim jacket, took his carbine off the rack and checked it, and sat down to wait in a kitchen chair. A slug of whiskey would have been welcome, but he resisted the temptation. Couldn't become too dependent on that stuff. He almost hoped it was Gaier and Lippert, so they could get it settled and done with. Talbot didn't care for these long drawn-out feuds. Better to fight and finish it in the first flush of anger. That's the way Talbot would have done it in Hillton, if Benners hadn't restrained him. You couldn't argue with a man who had just saved your life.

Funny about Ben and me, Talbot reflected. *Long-time friends but always with certain reservations. Never a full, free-and-easy, whole-hearted friendship. Always rivals in everything, even before Sue Mallory came into the picture, yet we never came to open outright fighting. Both a little leery of each other, I guess, not really afraid but plenty respectful. We fought all the other kids, but never one another.* Well, it was time to wake Charley Spade. The old man'd never forgive Tal, if he should miss any kind of a ruckus.

In the bedroom Charley was already sitting up on the edge of his bunk.

"Tryin' to run a sandy on me, Tal?" he complained. "Expectin' company and leavin' me sleep. I ain't that old yet, son . . ."

When the freighter rumbled near on the wagon road across the creek, Talbot was waiting in the barn with Old Charley posted in the house. If Gaier and Lippert came in they'd be caught in a crossfire. Watching the dust cloud up silver in the moonlight, Talbot wondered if the heavy rig would stop out there or continue on toward Hillton and Fort Rawson. When it creaked to a halt at the roadside Talbot levered a shell into the chamber of his Spencer, certain that it was Harry Gaier and Leo Lippert coming to gun him.

BUT ONLY one man crossed the bridge and emerged from the dark shadow of cottonwoods and willows into the moonbeams, and Talbot recognized the huge easy-moving bulk even before that voice hailed the house.

"Tal! Hullo in there, Tal! It's me, Benners."

The big man stopped in surprise then, as Talbot stepped out of the barn with the carbine in the crook of his arm.

"Don't you ever sleep here, Tal?"

"Heard the wagon, Ben," drawled Talbot. "Thought it might be your boys Gaier and Lippert."

"I told them to lay off you, Tal."

"That won't keep 'em off. Come on in and have a drink or some coffee."

Benners shook his head.

"Haven't got time. I come to ask a favor."

Talbot smiled. "Anything within reason, Ben. What is it?"

"Got a load hung up down at Selbro's," said Benners. "Driver took sick—or drunk mostly. Thought you might pick it up for me, Tal. I'll pay for your time."

"Why, sure, Ben, but we don't have to talk about pay."

"Only fair. And it's not an easy run."

"Where's it going, Ben?" asked Talbot, beginning to suspect.

Benners spat and scuffed the ground with his boot.

"Okemo, but it's not as bad as it sounds. The army's got patrols out in the Caprocks, keeping the Sioux on the run."

"Could be why your driver took drunk?"

"Sure, it probably was," Benners admitted. "But look here, Tal. If you'll take this one into Hillton, I'll borrow a horse and go back and make the run to Okemo myself."

Talbot grinned. "No, Ben. You got more reason to hit Hillton than I have. I'll pick up the other rig. Nothing much to do here anyway."

"I sure appreciate it, Tal, and you won't lose anything on the deal." Benners smiled broadly and laid a friendly arm on Talbot's shoulders. They were about of a height, but Tal was lanky and lean beside Ben's solid frame.

Charley Spade called from the house.

"If you ain't comin' in, Ben, I'm goin' back to bed. I'm the only workin' hand on this layout anyway."

"Good night, Charley," said Benners. "Sorry to disturb you this way."

"It's all right, Ben," came back the voice of Old Charley. "We was expectin' somethin' even worse than you."

Benners handed Talbot a cigar, placed one in his own mouth, and lit a match.

Benners said, "Charley don't like me much, does he?"

Talbot drew in the fragrant smoke and laughed softly.

"He don't like anybody much except Mike Mallory and maybe me. And he had his heart set on me marrying Mike's daughter, so he wouldn't like any other man who was going to do that."

Benners grunted behind the cigar.

"Not so sure I'm going to, Tal. Sue's a hard girl to understand sometimes."

"They all are. But your engagement was announced, Ben."

"That don't mean everything. You still figure in, Tal, maybe more than you know. Sue feels pretty bad 'cause you stopped coming around to see her." Benners coughed and spat aside, his embarrassment tinged with anger.

"I don't figure at all," Talbot said softly. "I checked out some time ago."

The cigar tilted as Benners' teeth tightened.

"You mean you don't want her?" His animosity was open now, and once more Talbot had the feeling that sooner or later real trouble would flare between them.

"It's not that, Ben, and I reckon you know it. I haven't got anything to offer a girl like Sue." Talbot smiled and gestured. "Now suppose you tell me about that trip through the Caprocks, while I saddle up and get ready to ride."

"Sorry, Tal," said Benners, with a warm sudden smile. "Guess I'm kind of edgy."

"Forget it, Ben," said Talbot, as they turned together toward the dark arch of the barn. "In the spring with the Sioux around everybody's on edge around here."

On the long ride south to Selbro's Ford, Talbot was plagued by the notion that Benners might want to get him killed in the Caprocks, although it didn't make much sense under the circumstances. Regardless of what Ben said, Tal was no longer in the running for Sue Mallory. Talbot had conceded and withdrawn because he had nothing but a small two-bit spread to stake against Ben's prosperous freighting business, and while Sue wasn't unduly mercenary she was as practical and sensible as the daughter of Sheriff Mike Mallory should be. Tal just didn't hold the cards to buck Ben in that game, and so he had dropped out as a smart poker player ought to when there was no chance whatever of bluffing through with a poor hand.

Thus there was no reason why Benners should want to get rid of Talbot, as far as he could see. And only a few weeks ago in town Ben had saved Tal's life, when Harry Gaier and Leo Lippert had Tal trapped between them in the yard of the livery stable. Benners had called his men off at gunpoint and made them drop their belts, and then stood by while Talbot smashed the two gunfighters into the dirt with his bare fists. If Ben had wanted Tal dead, he would have let Gaier and Lippert shoot him then and there. So this idea about Ben's sending him out to die in Sioux country was ridiculous, yet somehow it persisted naggingly in Talbot's troubled mind.

Talbot made good time on his big rangy dun, riding the moon and stars out of the sky, and the sun was rising over the eastern bad lands when he came within sight of Selbro's trading post on the Calodet River. Lights twinkled through the gray mists from the stream, and there was early activity around the buildings. The blood-red sun stained the jumbled buttes to the east with fantastic colors and carmined the Caprocks in the western distance. Talbot stared at the Caprock skyline with a thoughtful eye and cold growing premonitions. In those raw eroded hills, cavalry details from Fort Rawson were playing a grim game of tag with the wild young bucks of a subchief called Silver Wolf. Through the heart of that hostile territory lay the trail to Okemo.

2 Renegade

John Selbro, tall and straight and white-bearded, came out on the gallery of the long low main structure, and shook hands with Talbot after he dismounted.

"You've got a nice little spread up there, Tal. I should think you'd stick to running it."

"Maybe I've got a favor to return, John," said Talbot.

Selbro sighed.

"Yes, I suppose you have, son. Come

in and have some breakfast with me. I'll have the boys harness up for you."

"Where's Dougald?" asked Talbot, naming the guard who had been left with the wagon.

"Sleeping off a drunk. I wouldn't sell him but he got it somewhere."

"They all get drunk this side of the Caprocks, John?"

"You blame them, Tal?" murmured John Selbro. "I don't know as I do. Might recommend it for you, son, but I reckon you'd turn it down. Ben's asking quite a lot though."

Talbot smiled.

"Well, I owe him quite a lot, John."

"Go ahead and wash up. I'll have your horse taken care of and the mules harnessed in. And maybe they can get Dougald on his feet, but I wouldn't gamble on it . . ."

After breakfast Talbot walked out to the large barn. The freight wagon stood in front with the six mules in the traces. Dougald was lounging against a feedbox, squat, sullen and glowering.

"I ain't ridin' that rig, Talbot," he said, with an ugly scowl. "And if you got a grain of sense you won't git on it neither."

"Where's your nerve, man?" Talbot demanded.

"It don't take nerve to commit suicide. It just takes lack of brains. Git on your way now, mister, and don't mess around with me. I'm feeling mighty mean this mornin'."

Dougald straightened off the box, rolling massive shoulders and flexing brawny arms, the alcohol reek overpowering.

Talbot laughed softly.

"Trying to scare somebody, Doug?"

"Git goin', stringbean, before I snap your spine!" snarled Dougald. "I ain't foolin', boy. Climb onto that box and pull out before you git hurt bad!"

Talbot laughed again at him.

"A fighter like you hadn't ought to be scared of a few Sioux, strong man."

With a roar of rage Dougald catapulted forward, his great arms outflung to grapple and tear and crush the tall slender figure before him. Talbot crouched and moved straight in, taking a few clubbing blows on the head and shoulders as he ripped his own hands deep into the abdomen. Gasping and retching, Dougald doubled up and reeled backward, with Tal driving after him.

Striking left and right with speed, power and precision, Talbot slashed that brute face, lifting the man upright and beating his head far back, feeling the solid shocks jar his own shoulders. Dougald fell against the grainbox, blood drooling from his lacerated lips. Bouncing off he pawed the air blindly, twisted in a top-heavy blundering circle, and pitched heavily to the straw-littered floor. Dougald lay there sobbing and moaning on his face, and Talbot stood, massaging his knuckles and looking down at him.

Hostlers and stable boys stared in awed amazement, and one youngster said, "I woulda sworn he could kill you dead, mister!"

Talbot grinned at the kid.

"You can't always tell, son. It isn't always the ones that look tough and talk tough."

"You want us to load him on the wagon?" inquired a hostler.

"No, I don't want him," Talbot drawled. "Rather go it alone."

But he did take Dougald's Henry rifle and a belt of .44-40's, along with his own Spencer and extra shell belt, when he went out to inspect the mules, wagon and load, before climbing onto the seat. Talbot had handled six-horse hitches before. The ribbons arranged, he kicked off the brake and rolled the ponderous Murphy westward, with the rising sun at his back and the entire population of the trading-post settlement out to watch him go. Due west for the Caprocks, the stronghold of Silver Fox and his Sioux warriors, and beyond

the gaunt ragged hills, the frontier town of Okemo.

The road wound, dipping and rising through the bleak upland barriers, and fear and tension rode with him under the overhanging threat of danger and death. The sun climbed and burned into his backbone, then blazed straight down upon his head, and later was a blinding glare on his face. Sweat poured and ran beneath saturated clothing, and alkali dust added its bite to the torment of sun and wind and insects. Talbot saw signal smokes but no Sioux; signs but no troopers from Rawson.

Vistas opened on either side as the sunburnt hills blurred past, some with grass and trees and even spring flowers, others nothing but naked rock and raw earth. Eagles wheeled high in the molten blue, and kingfishers scouted the creeks. On the ground Talbot glimpsed jack rabbits and prairie dogs, sage hens and curlews, and the song of meadowlarks reached him occasionally. Some of the lusher valleys were bright with Indian paintbrush, gentian and lupine, harebell and larkspur and buttercup. Drier flats were arid as desert, with tumbleweed blowing over sandy dunes and stone escarpments, and lizards and snakes slithering in the shale. A land of infinite variety, wild primitive beauty, and immense loneliness.

Talbot was long since jolted numb and groggy by the racking motion of the hard seat, as the wagon smashed over the rough trail behind the plodding mules. The load wasn't too heavy, but any kind of speed was out of the question. Already the journey semed like an endless nightmare in the furnace heat. Chewing his tobacco, Tal cursed such a mode of transportation and yearned for a horse and saddle. The emptiness and grinding monotony palled on him. He wished he'd never seen nor heard of Benners and his freight line. Now and then he sang tunelessly:

You never know where daddy'll go
When daddy says goodby;
He may slip into the Longhorn bar
For a snort or two of rye,
Or down the line to Madam Pine's
For some loving on the sly . . .
Oh, you just don't know where he will go,
When that man says goodby.

Late in the afternoon Talbot saw dust streamers slanting in toward the road ahead of him. A column of riders, but he had no way of telling whether it was the U.S. Cavalry or Sioux braves on the warpath. If it was Indians all he could hope for was a quick easy death. Fear stirred in him like a deep physical sickness, mingled with anger and disgust at having to meet such a fate and die so senselessly. He had felt something like this coming, ever since awakening at two o'clock in the morning. But Talbot wasn't resigned to it or giving up. Those red buzzards would know they'd been in a fight before Tal went under.

SPOTTING A likely looking place to fort up in a side canyon, Talbot pulled off the trail and ran the mules and the Murphy in under a shelving sandstone ledge screened sparsely with brush and boulders. He couldn't hide the huge rig, any more than he could run away with it, but here was a good place to make his stand. Talbot drank from the canteen, bit off a fresh chew, and climbed down with his two rifles and shell belts to select a position in the rocks. Settled to his satisfaction, Tal waited and watched the canyon mouth to see what would come up the roadway from the west. Dusty blue uniforms or painted copperskinned bodies? Bay cavalry geldings or spotted Indian ponies? Whoever it was would see his turnoff tracks and follow him in here.

The crisp chop of shod hoofs and the jangle of equipment indicated cavalry before anything came into view, yet Talbot couldn't be certain. It might be Sioux riding army horses and hung with army gear, if Silver Wolf's bucks had massacred some detail from Fort Rawson. But when

the head of the column appeared it was cavalry, and nothing had ever looked so good to Talbot as those bleached blue uniforms and lean brown-faced troopers. His heart went up singing as the riders filed into the canyon on his trace, and Talbot recognized Lieutenant Riley, Sergeant Kress, and other men he had drunk and gambled with once in awhile in Hillton.

Leaving the carbines stacked against a boulder, Talbot walked out from beneath the ledge to greet the cavalry, but something in the eyes and manners of the soldiers held him silent. Lieutenant Riley, ramrod-thin and saber-keen in the saddle, was unsmiling, strangely somber and hostile for a man who had been so friendly to Talbot in the Great Northern Saloon. And Sergeant Kress was wicked-eyed and bitter-mouthed, as he stared down at the rancher.

"You hiding from us, Talbot?" asked Riley, voice as cold as his blue glance.

"Not hardly," Talbot drawled, hurt and bewildered. "It could have been Sioux."

"You wish it was, don't you?" Kress said cuttingly.

Talbot looked from one to the other.

"What the hell is this anyway?"

"That's what we're going to find out," Riley said. "Sergeant, detail two men to search that wagon. You don't mind, do you, Tal?"

"Why should I mind? I'm just driving the damn thing. I don't even know what's in it myself, Jack."

Riley's blue gaze pierced him.

"Wish I could believe that, Tal. Never expected to see you out here—with this."

"Never expected to be here," Talbot said. "The regular driver got drunk at Selbro's and Benners asked me to take over."

"Where's this load going?"

"Okemo, naturally."

Riley shook his head.

"Not so naturally, Tal. Some of these wagons have been unloading right here in the Caprocks."

Talbot swore softly.

"I don't know anything about that, Jack. I'm no freighter."

Lieutenant Riley dismounted the detail in the shade of the redstone mesa, and the men walked their horses about and eyed Talbot with pure malevolence. Sergeant Kress, campaign hat pushed back on his red head, stood at the rear of the wagon. Splintering sounds issued from the hooded body, and a trooper leaned out over the tailgate and spoke to Kress. The sergeant turned to confer with Riley, and Talbot waited with a hopeless sinking sensation until the officer whirled upon him.

"Two crates of Henry repeating rifles and three boxes of forty-four forty ammunition," Riley said, biting off the words. "There's only one market for that material —Silver Wolf's Sioux. You're under arrest, Talbot, and the wagon and load are confiscated."

"But I didn't know about it," Talbot protested, in desperation. "Do you think I'd sell guns to the Indians, Jack? You know—"

"I didn't think so, Tal," said Riley grimly. "But we'll have to take you and the evidence back to Rawson."

A raging animal sound swelled from the ranks, and one voice rose furiously above the rest.

"What we waitin' for? Why don't we string the dirty renegade up right here?"

"Quiet!" commanded Riley. "No more of that talk, men."

"Benners wouldn't run guns to the Sioux either," Talbot said.

"Perhaps not," Riley admitted. "But it's either Benners or someone in his employ. Or some friend of his—like yourself."

"A hell of a thing to accuse a man of," said Talbot tautly.

Lieutenant Jack Riley nodded.

"It's all of that—and worse. Yesterday we found what was left of Lieutenant How-

ell's column, slaughtered and scalped and mutilated to the last man. Riddled with bullets from Henry repeaters, Talbot, the brass forty-four forties all over the ground —You can understand why the men feel as they do."

"I'll take that belt and gun, mister," Sergeant Kress said.

Ill to the point of gagging, Talbot unbuckled the gun belt and handed it over. So this was Benners's game, he thought with murderous fury. Ben had been running guns and ammunition and whiskey to the Sioux, getting all the richer on the contraband, and now he had framed Talbot for fair. He must have been worried that Sue Mallory still preferred Tal, so Ben decided to eliminate him once and for all.

From that moment on Talbot lived for one purpose: To escape and run down and kill Benners, the man who had always been his enemy under the guise of friendship.

ALL THE WAY out of the Caprocks and north toward Hillton and Fort Rawson, Talbot was trying to persuade Lieutenant Riley and Sergeant Kress of his innocence and his anxiety to get Benners and break up the gun-running traffic. Never before had Tal talked so long and hard and earnestly, and to so little avail, it seemed.

But there were several items in Talbot's favor. In the past Riley and Kress had grown to like and respect him, and you get to know a man pretty well in a barroom or over a poker table. This had been Tal's first trip with a freight wagon, and the small cargo of arms looked more like a plant than a real shipment of contraband. Whoever was supplying Silver Wolf had to have means of transportation, which Talbot lacked. The more they discussed it, the guiltier Benners appeared. Ben's impeccable reputation could no longer protect him from suspicion, as it had up to this time. The ownership of the wagons branded him guilty, unless Benners could disprove it.

"And I'll make him talk," Talbot promised. "I'll beat the truth out of him with a gun barrel if I have to. It'll save the army a lot of time and trouble."

"That's true, we need every man we can throw into the field against the Sioux," conceded Riley. "But I should take you into the post and let Major Demarest make the decision, Tal."

"That'll give Benners too much time to cover up," Talbot protested. "Word'll get out and Ben and his gunmen will be ready and waiting for me."

"I thought you and Ben were pretty close, Tal," said Kress. "Why should he want to frame you? On account of Sheriff Mallory's daughter?"

"Maybe," drawled Talbot. "Or maybe he's always hated me, and I'm not so sure I haven't always hated him."

"Can you handle Benners, Tal?" inquired Riley.

Talbot smiled gravely.

"That's never been settled, Jack, although it ought to have been years ago. High time it was now—I'll either take him or die trying. Whichever way it turns out, you don't stand to lose anything."

"I'd rather leave it up to the CO," mused Riley.

Kress raised his fiery head.

"He'd go by the book and keep Tal behind bars. If the prisoner escapes, he can't do much more than chew our ears off for it."

Lieutenant Riley sighed and stroked his sharp-boned jaws.

"It looks as if you're going to break loose, Tal. Along about the night we camp near your ranch, so you can pick up a horse and guns there, and head into Hillton after Benners."

"I'm sure obliged, boys," drawled Talbot. "And you'll never be sorry for this either . . ."

The escape was contrived when the column bivouacked within a mile of the Talbot spread, and with Kress's assistance Tal

managed to take his gun belt and Colt and Spencer carbine along with him.

At the ranch Talbot shaved, bathed and dressed in a clean outfit, while Charley Spade saddled up the black stallion for him. Somehow rumors of Tal's military arrest had floated north ahead of him, according to Old Charley, and that might complicate matters in town. But Tal was resolved to get to Benners before anyone or anything could stop him. Old Charley grumbled about being left behind, but Talbot insisted on it.

In the saddle, with all that explosive black power under him, Talbot lined out for Hillton, unworried by any pursuit and concentrating on the task before him. At long last things between Benners and himself were coming to a climax. Their relationship had been more of a truce than a friendly alliance anyway. Now the enmity was out in the open, war was declared, and Talbot fretted impatiently to reach Ben and have it out with him. The man was a rotten renegade, thoroughly evil, and Tal shuddered to think that Sue Mallory might have married Benners, if this hadn't happened.

It was around midnight when Talbot approached Hillton. Front Street was still awake in bright spots, but most of the community slumbered in darkness. On the outskirts a lamp glowed in the front room of the Mallory home, and Talbot reined up and stepped from the leather. Benners might be in there with Sue. He'd rather catch Ben alone, but he'd have to take him wherever he found him. There was no time to be wasted. Tal hoped old Sheriff Mike was in bed. Sue needed a lesson to open her eyes and sharpen her judgment. Maybe it would come right here in her own parlor.

But Talbot could see that Sue was alone, reading in the room, as he mounted the porch steps and tapped on the entrance. The girl came and stood staring at him through the screen door, making no move to open it, her eyes wide and shocked like her fine clear features. She was lovely and full-bodied in the dimness, her well-remembered fragrance flowing out to him, but Sue's face showed loathing and revulsion.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "How did you get away?"

"Away from what?"

"The army. They arrested you, didn't they? Oh, Tal, how could you? How could you do that to Ben?"

Talbot laughed dryly.

"You're a little mixed up, Sue. How could Ben do that to me, you mean."

"Ben didn't do anything to you. I know all about it. You used one of his wagons to carry guns to the Indians. You—"

"All right, all right," Talbot said wearily. "Just tell me where Ben is. Never mind the rest."

Her gaze was incredulous.

"How can you face Ben—after that?"

"Where is he?"

"He'll kill you on sight, you fool!"

Talbot grinned bleakly.

"If I don't get him first. You know where to find him?"

"He's—he's out of town somewhere."

"You don't lie very good, Sue," drawled Talbot. "Reckon I'll find him all right. Good night, Sue." He wheeled away.

"Tal!" she cried. "Wait, Tal! Please—You can't . . ."

But he was already down the walk, swinging into the leather, and riding on toward the center of the settlement. Sue's clawed fingers fell away from the screen, and she turned back into the mellow lamplight with a broken choking sob. The slow clop of hoofs drifted back along the shadowy street echoing dully in her ears.

3 Last Reward

Talbot turned the great black horse into Front Street, his hatred for Benners blazing higher and stronger than ever.

Ben had been spreading the story, blackening Tal's name in this country, making Sue Mallory despise him. A white renegade was lower than any cattle rustler or horse thief or bank robber, worse than the worst kind of killer. Benners was the renegade, but he had hung the name upon Talbot.

Holding the stallion to a dancy walk, Talbot searched both sides of the main thoroughfare for Benners but did not see him. The Continental Hotel loomed on the right, and two men emerged from the lobby onto the long veranda. Talbot cursed through set teeth as he identified them in the gallery lights. The stocky compact form of Harry Gaier beside the thin wiry Leo Lippert. He had no time for them now. All he wanted was Benners. But if they got in his way Talbot would burn them down damn sudden.

Nothing was going to keep him away from Benners tonight.

Gaier and Lippert spotted Talbot and froze in their tracks in front of the entrance, elbows out and hands hanging near their guns. Surprise stunned them, left them hesitant and uncertain. Talbot drew his Colt and booted the horse forward, lifting the pistol into line. On the verge of drawing, Gaier and Lippert broke and ducked back inside the hotel, and Talbot swept by on a dead run. He'd settle with those two later. Right now he wanted Benners.

He kept the black running until he neared the freight agency, and then pulled him down.

Lamplight made yellow rectangles of the office windows, and Talbot smiled with satisfaction as he jogged slowly across the yard. It looked as if Ben was working late, and most likely alone. There were no other signs of life about the wagon yard. Talbot swung down and dropped the reins this side of the lighted building. He moved to the corner, climbed onto the porch there, and crouched forward to the entrance, glimpsing the interior through a murky window. Benners was alone behind a flat desk, bent intently over some paper work, the light glinting on his tousled black curls. A broad rugged man with a grave handsome face.

Talbot stepped inside, hands swinging free and empty, and was almost at the desk before Benners looked up, shock in his dark eyes and features. Ben started reaching and rising, but Talbot's gun was already clear and rising like a hammer as he leaned across the wood. Tal chopped the barrel and felt the jar along his arm, as the curly head bowed under the smashing impact. And Benners fell back into the chair, his half-drawn pistol clattering to the floor.

Circling the desk, Talbot picked up the gun, thrust it into his waistband, and stood looking down at the other man. Benners sagged in the chair, arms dangling and head lolling, but he wasn't wholly unconscious. A trickle of blood traced his brow and cheek. His breath sawed raggedly in and out. Talbot waited with quite patience, the Colt hanging loosely in his big right hand. Under the bronzed skin of Tal's face the bone structure stood out sharply.

Finally Benners straightened in the chair and raised his head, a slight glaze still blurring his eyes.

"You should of used a bullet, boy," he said, thick and slow.

"I'm going to," Talbot told him. "But first I want to hear you talk."

"Talk? What have I got to talk about—to you?"

"Plenty! The Henrys and shells you planted in that wagon, for instance."

"I planted? You're crazy, man!" rasped Benners. "You can't crawl out of it that way. You were using my wagon to—"

Talbot cut in disgustedly, "You can feed that to Sue, but nobody else is going to swallow it. You might as well come clean, Ben. You're going to die anyway."

Benners made a hopeless gesture.

"What's the use? Go ahead and shoot, Tal."

"You'll get your chance when I'm ready to shoot."

"Just how?"

"I'll leather my gun and slide yours butt first across the desk. When your hand touches it I'll start reaching."

Benners grimaced.

"You're too fair! You always were faster, but I'd sure like to get my hands on you."

"This has gone too far to be settled with bare hands, Ben. Start talking now. Speak up and make it true—for once in your life." Talbot motioned with his .44.

Benners touched his bleeding scalp and blinked up at him.

"You mean to say you didn't know those guns were in the wagon, Tal?"

"I didn't, for a fact," Talbot drawled. "But you sure as hell did."

"That's where you're wrong, boy," declared Benners, wagging his head. "Maybe we've both been wrong, blaming each other. Maybe we ought to start looking around for somebody else, Tal."

"Once I might of believed you, Ben, but no more," Talbot said. "Are you going to come out with the truth or die lying?"

"I am telling the truth, dammit all."

"No use, Ben. You've been freighting that stuff to the Sioux, and you've got to die. If I don't get you the army will, and I want you myself." He sheathed his own Colt and laid Ben's on the desk. "Let's get it done with. You'd better stand up."

Benners remained seated.

"I won't pick that gun up, Tal. I'd fight you, I'm not afraid to fight, but this is dead wrong. Stop and think, Tal. I haven't been running guns to the Indians, but somebody in my outfit has. I didn't frame you and you didn't cross me, but somebody's been hurrahing us both." He was starkly sincere.

Impressed in spite of himself, Talbot frowned in deep thought.

"Who was the driver that got drunk at Selbro's, Ben?"

"Leo Lippert."

"THEN IT'S Lippert and Gaier, I reckon," drawled Talbot, lifting Benners's gun by the barrel and handing it over to him. "I just saw them at the Continental. Let's look 'em up, Ben."

Benners rose and holstered his Colt with a wan smile.

"That's better, Tal. I should of known and you should of known, but we both got sidetracked. A couple of bull-heads, I guess."

Talbot grinned at him.

"Come on, Ben. Maybe we can take it out on them, if they haven't lit a shuck already."

"I don't know why we didn't give it to 'em that day down by the livery barn," Benners said. "You wanted to, Tal, but I held you up, for some ungodly reason."

"Well, we've got a lot more reason to blast them now, Ben," said Talbot. "You better take a horse in case they try to run for it."

Benners got a gray gelding out of the stable and Talbot climbed onto his black and then they rode out of the freight yard and back toward the business section of Hillton. The saloons were still open, but most of the customers had moved outside under the board awnings. Word had got around that Talbot was in town, and people were expecting fireworks of some sort. They could hardly believe their eyes when they saw Benners and Talbot riding in side by side, calm and peaceful and friendly.

Front Street was quiet with a night breeze stirring up dust and blowing scraps of paper and grit across the slat sidewalks. Clouds of insects swarmed about the street lamps, their humming attuned to the low murmur of voices along the arcades. Horses shifted and pawed dirt at the hitch-

racks, and dogs set up a barking somewhere in the background.

Talbot was relieved to learn that Benners had not framed him, and he knew Ben was feeling a similar relief. They didn't talk about it, but they were back together again and closer than ever before. Tal was sorry he had gunwhipped Ben, but it was either that or shooting, and it would have been pure hell if he had killed Ben when he was innocent. It was good to have the issues straightened out, and the true enemy clearly established. There was no doubt that Gaier and Lippert had been using Ben's freight line to peddle rifles, shells and liquor to Silver Wolf's Sioux.

"They don't stay at the Continental, do they?" Talbot asked.

"No, they just hang around there," Benners said. "Looking for stray women to promote or drummers to fleece."

"A real nice pair."

"Yeah, I'm sure proud I hired them."

The hotel was ahead on their left now, and the gallery lamps no longer burned. Could be the lateness of the hour, or it could be the two renegades had extinguished them for their own purposes. Gaier and Lippert might be lurking in the lobby, or they might have split to opposite sides of the street to await Talbot's return. On the other hand maybe they figured Benners would take care of Tal and there was nothing to worry about. Talbot doubted that they had pulled out; they were too sure of themselves, too proud of their prowess with guns, to run away. He wondered what would be the best way to smoke them out, as he and Ben rode at a walk through broad jagged strip of light and shadow.

"They're still here," Talbot said. "Holed up somewhere."

Benners nodded. "Maybe they don't like it with the odds even."

"They're pretty cocky. Probably rate us easy marks, Ben."

"Most likely," agreed Benners. "Sam Colt made big men of 'em, Tal."

They plodded onward, alert and watchful, with eyes roving and hands ready, two high rawboned figures in the saddle.

A shot boomed in an alley across from the hotel, and a familiar voice went up.

"Out in the open, you skulkin' varmint! Git out there and fight like a man, or I'll put the next one between your shoulders!" The vicious rasping voice of Old Charley Spade, come into town against orders.

Leo Lippert, flushed from the alley by Old Charley, came out shooting diagonally across the street at the two horsemen.

Benners and Talbot had drawn in the saddle, and Ben was returning Leo's fire. Leaving that right flank to Ben, Talbot flung from the leather and ran bent and weaving toward the hotel, having caught a flickering motion and the glimmer of steel near the entrance. Lead seared past Tal's shoulder as gunflame bloomed from the gallery, and Tal threw a running shot back at the squat crouched shape of Harry Gaier. Another slug slashed splinters over Talbot as he rammed into the wall below the veranda railing.

OUT IN midstreet the gray gelding reared screaming, and Benners kicked free of the stirrups and jumped backward over the horse's rump. The gray came down on buckling forelegs and rolled in the gravel, thrashing up welters of dirt, with Benners and Lippert firing back and forth.

The horse ceased kicking and the haze cleared between them. Both men were still on their feet, but Lippert was breaking at the knees and waist. His last shot ripped into the earth and pelted the dying gray with a shower of gravel. Benners brought his barrel down and flame torched from it. The bullet straightened Lippert and slammed him back against a hitchrail. Leo hung there a moment, teetered forward on jacking legs, and pitched into the street.

In the meanwhile Talbot reached the porch steps, another spray of splinters

stinging his cheek, and drove Gaier back inside the hotel, fire streaking to and fro between them. Gaier had emptied one gun, and was reaching for the other as he retreated toward the lobby staircase. Talbot had two shells left in his Colt. When Gaier stopped shooting, Tal bounded up the steps and lunged across the porch.

Harry Gaier was halfway up the inside stairway, his gun roaring and flashing on a downward slant at the entrance. Slugs scorched all around Talbot, tugging at his clothes and burning his flesh, but he kept driving forward and brought his .44 to bear. It leaped hard in his hand, the flame lancing upward, and Gaier spun against the banister and clung there.

Talbot came to a balanced halt and hammered his last shot into that jerking form. Gaier dropped his pistol, doubled over the rail, and slid swiftly to the bottom, rolling and sprawling loosely at Talbot's feet. The stillness felt odd in Tal's ears after all that racket. He turned Gaier over and saw that he was beyond talking. Ejecting the empties and refilling the cylinder, Talbot went outside and down to the street.

It was a relief and pleasure to see the curly head and broad shoulders of Benners there, with sour-faced Old Charley Spade.

"Thought I told you to stay home," said Talbot, with mock severity.

"If I'd a stayed home, you two boys'd be layin' here in the dirt about now."

"I know it." Talbot put his arm around the stooped shoulders. "And we're obliged, Charley."

"Lippert's singing to Mike," said Benners. "They were the ones all right, Tal."

Then Sue Mallory came through the jostling ranks and smiled at Old Charley and linked her arms through those of Benners and Talbot.

"I'm glad to see you two alive—and together," she said gently.

"We'll be together from here on, won't we, Tal?" said Benners.

"I reckon so, Ben," drawled Talbot.

Truth Will Out!

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"You're going to be best man, aren't you?" Benners asked.

"Why sure, I always was. But right now I crave some whiskey."

"For once you're talkin' sense, son," Charley Spade declared. "I'll join you."

"Me, too," said Benners. "You don't mind, Sue? Gunsmoke gives a man an awful thirst."

"Go right ahead, Ben," said Sue Mallory. "I'll have coffee at the house for all of you, when you get enough of the other." She smiled and watched them walk away toward the Great Northern Saloon.

As they broke out of the crowd, Old Charley Spade said, "A lot of woman, that gal. Was I twenty years younger, you boys wouldn't have a chance. Too bad she ain't twins, Tal."

Talbot smiled and laid a large hand on the old man's back.

"I'll be all right, Charley," he said. "As long as you're around." ♠ ♠ ♠

SUDDEN SIX MAN

Shackleford bullets had Twenty-mile on the run, until the day Frank Shannon decided it was time to stand fast—or die even faster!

IT HAPPENED Sunday, on a picnic at Green River. Four men, still drunk after a night of carousing in Twentymile, rode up and started trouble. There was an argument and one of them killed Ed Stearn. Frank Shannon told Dean about it when Dean stopped by on his way back from Cheyenne.

"Ed always was a hot head," Dean said. "Who were the four?"

"Floyd Shackleford fired the shot," Frank told him. "Two were riders from his brother's ranch, and the other one was Jack Means."

"A hell of a thing," Dean said. "What did you do?"

There was a grin on Ernie's face and mockery in his voice . . .

"The shooting sobered them up and they got the hell out of there in a hurry," Frank said. "Nothing much we could do, because all the guns we had was a little old rifle we'd been using for target practice. I went to town next morning and filed a complaint, and Jackson picked Floyd up and put him in jail."

"He still there?" Dean asked.

Frank lifted a corner of his mouth. "Ernie bailed him out the same day."

"Well, he's Floyd's older brother," Dean said. "You can hardly blame him."

"No," Frank said. "But Floyd grew up to be a braggart and a bully, and I blame Ernie for that."

"I guess," Dean said, as though it didn't mean a thing one way or the other. "Who was all at the picnic?"

Frank said the Mulders and their kids,

By J. L. BOUMA

the Carters, Ed, Kate and himself. He told a little more of what had happened.

"The women were fixing the grub, and us men were shooting hell out of a tin can, when they rode up. They started passing little remarks, while they kept drinking from bottles they had in their saddlebags. Carter tried joking with 'em, but they turned ugly, and that made Ed mad He told 'em to get the hell out of there, and Floyd answered something I hate to repeat. Well, that did it. Mulder had used the rifle last and had leaned it up against a tree, and Ed made a jump for it. He never got that far. Floyd turned his horse and shot him through the chest."

"Well, you got enough witnesses," Dean said. "When's the trial?"

Frank said it was Friday. "They're working on picking the jury. I don't guess there'll be any trouble. It's open and shut."

"Well, I reckon," Dean said slowly, as if he wasn't quite sure. "Ernie make his move yet?"

Frank knew what Dean meant. Ernie Shackleford packed a lot of weight in this corner of Wyoming, and that was for sure.

"I been expecting him," he said. "But here it is Wednesday and he still hasn't shown."

"You had trouble with him when you were deputy," Dean said. "He'll remember that and add it to his side of the scales. If I was you I'd be damn careful."

Frank nodded soberly, aware that the old stubborn anger was riding him. Having been a lawman, he had set ideas about justice and punishment. Ernie knew that. The cattle rancher had run this part of the country to suit himself for a long, long time until Frank became deputy sheriff and cut him down to size.

"It's been two years since I quit," he said, "and he hasn't bothered me all that time."

"Had no reason," Dean said logically. "How's Kate?"

Frank grinned. "Mad as a hornet. You know Ed was thinking of getting married, don't you? He had him a little girl back in Ohio that he was fixing to send for, but that's over the dam now. It got under Kate's skin."

"Good thing he wasn't already married to that little girl," Dean said, picking up the reins of his horse. "Well, I'll be riding along. Probably see you at the trial."

"So long," Frank said, and watched Dean canter out of the yard.

He stood there for a while, his head lowered, feeling the hot sun on the back of his neck. Portia trotted from around the house and nosed his hand, her tail wagging. The big collie was heavy with pups.

"You better go lay down," Frank told her. "You're in no condition to be running around."

He looked around at the mountains that humped jagged all around to shape this valley, and he had the feeling that they were moving in on him.

"Me and my imagination," he muttered.

He looked at the stubble of the new-mown wheat field, at the green corn growing chest high, at the potato patch that was doing fine. The small herd of purebred Herefords that browsed in the abundant grass of the fenced-in pasture out back had cost him most of the cash he'd saved riding for Hat, and later while he was deputy sheriff. His gaze found the blooded bull in the corral, and in his mind he told the bull that he'd better have done a good job. Well, the Herefords would be dropping their calves next month, and then he'd know.

He'd done a lot since he'd filed here. He could pride himself on that. He'd built his house snug, and now all it needed was a woman's touch. Kate would furnish that. The day they married he'd file another quarter section above his pasture land. Clear it and seed it and fence it in. Maybe raise hay on half of it. He'd need plenty of hay to feed his stock during the hard winters.

He had shaped the place and the future looked fine. But those mountains kept moving in, and the weight of worry was on him, making him discontented. He knew it was the shooting because he'd never felt this way before. The shooting and now waiting for something to happen, and wondering how it would come. He turned to the house for his noon meal.

PORTIA ALERTED him, bounding across the gold dust of the yard, barking furiously. He went outside and saw the two riders coming, and he spoke sharply to the collie. The dog trotted to the side of the house, giving out low rolls of thunder.

Ernie Shackleford reined in his black, saying with dry humor, "That dog makes too damn much noise." He was big and dark, an arrogant man at best, but shrewd enough to fit his mood to the occasion. "I ain't been out this way for a long time," he said, looking around. "Nice place you got here."

He's walking the edge, Frank thought, glancing at the other man. A stranger, thin and bony, with a narrow face and sleepy eyes. Fancy duds, a yellow kidskin glove on his left hand. He sat hipshot in the saddle, the thumb of his right hand hooked careless-like in the cartridge belt near his holstered Colt. Frank marked that. He'd seen this type before. Ernie had thought about it and had figured there was more than one way to skin a cat. Frank kept his face wooden, waiting for Ernie to speak his piece.

"You got some nice beef there," Ernie said. "From the looks of 'em they'll outweigh my longhorns a good three hundred pounds. You corn feed 'em, Frank?"

"When there's corn to spare." Frank shifted his gaze to the fields beyond.

"That bull takes my eye," Ernie said. "Turn a dozen like him loose with my cows and I'd end up with a real calf crop. Like to try it, anyhow. You take five hundred for that bull, Frank?"

"He ain't worth five hundred, and you know it."

Ernie grinned. "Be just between the two of us. I'm in a buying mood these days. Might even offer you a price for this place."

Frank looked thoughtful. "How much?"

A quick interest roused Ernie. He said carefully, "Same as I offered Mulder." Then he shook his head. "No, I'll do better than that. I'll top that a thousand. Your place is worth the difference."

"You're awful damn generous."

Ernie showed a flash of his arrogance at the tone of Frank's voice. "I could buy you and sell you ten times over."

"Maybe some, but not me," Frank said. "What did Mulder say?"

Ernie gave him a long look that ended with a grin. "He's selling, moving out."

"He'll have to stay for the trial."

Ernie's grin widened. "He'll stay that long." He paused to glance slyly at the thin man, then looked at Frank. "Don't get the wrong idea—I'm not pushing myself around. The old days are gone, and we both know it. But I can use this bottom land—"

Stubbornness moved like a weight in Frank's chest. He said shortly, "You're talking to the wrong man."

Ernie shrugged. "Suit yourself. You always were a stubborn cuss. Would five thousand bring you around?"

"Why the hell don't you get to the point?" Frank asked him.

Ernie tried to look amazed. "What point?" he said, and turned his horse. "Let's go, Iowa."

Iowa looked at Frank a moment with his sleepy eyes. They were expressionless as a cat's. He followed Ernie out of the yard, catching up with him before they turned on the road.

Well, Frank thought. He felt better, now that it was in the open. Ernie was

smart enough to know that he couldn't buck the law, and shrewd enough to figure other ways of helping his brother out of a tight. *From now on I'm packing a gun,* Frank thought. He went inside after it, then came out to saddle his horse.

Agnes Mulder was hanging wash on the line, but when she saw Frank coming along the driveway she scampered into the house. A big wagon was parked in front of the barn, and Jake Mulder was loading it with the accumulation of the years. He was a stocky, whiskered man, his face glazed with sweat. He stopped working long enough to give Frank a sullen stare, and then his eyes slid away and he turned abruptly into the barn.

When he came out carting a rusty old plow, Frank said, "So it's true."

Mulder grunted. He worried the plow into the wagon and stood back to wipe a hand under his nose. They'd never shared a real friendship, but they'd always gotten along, and now Mulder was acting like a stranger.

"Why did you do it, Jake?" Frank asked. "You proved up on this place last year, and you're doing fine. You're raising your kids here. Why sell out?"

"I was offered a good price, and that's that," Mulder said sullenly, and went back to the barn.

Frank followed him inside.

"Well, I hate to see you leave."

Mulder did not answer.

"I hope it ain't the trial that's bothering you," Frank said, wanting to get to the bottom of this. "We can't forget what happened to Ed, and we got to stick together on it and set it right."

Mulder shot him a guarded look.

"I don't know as I saw anything that needs settling. Maybe it was Ed's fault. If he hadn't run off at the mouth it wouldn't have happened. That's all I know."

"You know more than that!" Frank said, getting mad. "Ed was unarmed—"

"He had hold of the rifle."

"He did like hell! What's the matter with you, Jake? You letting Ernie buy you?"

"The hell with you," Mulder said sullenly. "Ed's dead, and that's that. Nothing can help him now, and I got a family to think about. I got enough worries."

"Jake, I'm sorry for you."

"Be sorry for yourself," Mulder said sullenly. He turned his back, making it plain that he had nothing more to say.

FRANK RODE away from there, turning it over in his mind. Ernie was throwing his weight around and making it stick. He'd have Floyd's lawyer plead self defense, and his two riders would back that story. Frank wondered about Jack Means, whose father ran a small spread south of Ernie's domain. The Means's were a hard-working lot who'd had some bad times. But they were honest folks, and the old man might get Jack to tell the truth. It was hard to say.

Frank forded the river and rode on. The Carters' homestead boxed in the bend of the river, and Frank swung into the yard, seeing no one around. He slid down and tied up at a corral rail, and he was turning away when he heard a rush of feet and then a whoop. Then a weight caught his shoulders, spinning him and bearing him to the ground. He blinked and looked up into Bob Carter's grinning young face, and he grinned back, saying, "You ain't big enough or old enough—not yet."

He chuckled inside of himself as he made a grab for Bob's wrist. Dan Carter's son was eighteen. He stood an inch over six feet and tipped the scales at Darby's feed store at a hundred and eighty. He was lean and strong and full of juices, and for the past year had tried his hand at taming Frank each time they met, never quite making it, but never stopping his try, either. Now he wedged an elbow under Frank's jaw, his weight bearing down.

"Say uncle!"

Frank let himself go slack. He put complaint in his voice.

"Hell, you didn't give me no chance."

Bob threw his head back and laughed, easing up a little.

"You ain't following that old yarn—" he began.

Frank had worked a leg up. Now he planted the sole of his boot against Bob's side and kicked him over, yelling, "I'm an old hound dog and too damn smart for a pup!"

They circled each other at a crouch. From the corner of his eye Frank saw Dan Carter's bulk appear from around the barn. Dan put his hands on his hips and shook his head.

"You'll be a long time learning, son," he told Bob.

"I'm turning ripe," the boy said, and made a jump for Frank. They tangled, raising a cloud of dust. Frank knocked Bob's arms aside, gripped him around the waist and heaved him bodily to the ground, then straddling him and bearing down. He grinned at the sweat-streaked face below him.

"Enough?"

Bob grunted and fought, squirming and kicking, then quit on a gusty breath.

"Enough." He got up, slapping dust from his clothes, cocking a confident look at Frank. "Next time or next year, but sooner or later you'll say uncle."

"I'll be thirty next year," Frank told him. "An old man, but still able to take you any day in the week and twice on Sundays." He fingered the back of his neck, wincing. "You're getting stronger, though," he admitted.

"Damn right," Bob said. "Man, I'm hungry! Maybe ma's got some of that pie left. You want a hunk, Frank?"

"I just had my dinner."

Bob went to the house and both men looked after him, Frank saying, "You raised a fighting rooster, Dan."

"Yeah," Dan said, giving Frank a small and embarrassed glance that wasn't at all like him. "He's a fine boy."

Frank moved back a step and put his shoulders against the barn. He took out his tobacco sack and started to shape a cigarette.

"I think we lost Mulder," he said, and told Dan about it. "Ernie bought him, the way he tried to buy me. Offered me five thousand for the place when I got a year to go before it's mine. That's two witnesses gone, because Agnes'll side with Jake. Ernie's lawyer'll probably talk to 'em, tell 'em what to say and how to say it. Ain't that a hell of a note?"

Dan hunkered down and picked up a little stick. He broke it absently.

"Ernie was by to see me this morning, too."

"He offer to buy you out?"

"Kind of angled that way, but he changed his mind."

Frank chuckled.

"I guess you told him."

Dan looked up. He was a solid man with a deep sense of integrity, but now there was misery in his eyes.

"I might as well tell you and get it over with," he said. "Hate for you to find out later and think worse of me than you will already."

He scratched at the yard's dust with the piece of stick. "I guess I'm no better than Mulder."

"What is it, Dan?"

"Bob. Ernie had this gunslinger with him, and Ernie and I was talking. I knew what he was edging around, and I was about ready to tell him to go to hell when this feller Iowa spotted Bob out in the field. He called Ernie to one side and said something, and then Ernie started telling me what a fine son I had. Full of vinegar. Said I'd have to watch him close to see that he didn't get in trouble. He didn't need to say much else."

Frank sighed.

"You could send Bob away until after the trial."

"That wouldn't do no good," Dan said heavily. "Ernie ain't a man to forget. And you know Bob. He usually packs a gun to town to make a little show—he's at that age. But he wouldn't no more think of using it on a man than he would to eat flies. Still he's cocky and proud, and if this Iowa was to make a wrong remark to him, he'd take it up. And that's the way Iowa would do it. You and me both know that. Goad the boy into going for his gun by insulting him, and don't think for a minute Bob wouldn't fall feet first in the trap."

He said in a low voice, "The boy means a lot to me and Clara. The girl we had died young, and he's all we got left. I can't face losing him, and that's what'll happen if Clara and I get up in court and tell what happened."

"Clara knows?"

Dan nodded.

"I had to tell her and we talked it over."

"Suppose Bob finds out?"

Dan's head snapped up, and his eyes were flinty.

"He won't find out because nobody's telling him."

Frank pinched the lobe of his ear.

"Sure. I guess I know how you feel. It's a hell of a thing, though."

"I know," Dan said. "But what can a man do? Ernie holds all the cards. I'm thinking that even if we all testified against Floyd it'd still be nothing that you'd want to bet your money on."

"Why's that?" Frank asked.

"The jury," Dan said. "Ernie got him a smart lawyer from Cheyenne, and I hear he's working around to picking a jury of men that got reason to be afraid of Ernie. Lombard's one of 'em, Blodget another."

He looked up at Frank, who nodded. Both Lombard and Blodget ran starvation outfits, and it wouldn't take much effort on Ernie's part to close either one or both of them out. And he'd see to it that they understood this before Floyd went on trial.

"It'll get around," Frank said. "Everybody in town'll know what Ernie's up to."

Dan rose.

"What the hell's the difference to Ernie? He's trying to save Floyd's neck, and you can't arrest him for that. Besides, a year from now it'll be water under the bridge. Folks forget easy, Frank."

Frank went after his horse. He swung up and stopped beside Dan Carter, and he said softly, "You won't forget."

Dan lowered his head.

"No," he said, "I'll never forget."

KATE'S FOLKS neighbored Carter to the north, and Frank headed that way. Jonathan Kruse, his wife and a hired man were out in the field, forking sheaves of wheat into their big wagon. They waved at Frank and he rode on to the house, where he found Kate churning butter in the shade of the big cottonwood. Her smile changed to a grin as he studied her in silence.

"You'd think I was a mule you were thinking of buying."

"I've seen you balky as a mule," Frank said, swinging down out of leather. "Ernie stop by here?"

"No." She rose, absently running her hands along her apron, waiting for him. A little impatience edging her full lips when he didn't hurry. She took the last step to meet him. "It's been since yesterday."

She was fire against him, pressing close, taking his kiss and giving back full measure. She reached up and bit the lobe of his ear, her fingers digging into the big muscles of his arm, then ran her lips across his cheeks and to his mouth again.

"Lordy, Lordy," she breathed, moving her head back. "Still—" she cocked a look at him—"it's been better. What's keeping you away?"

He sighed and led her to the back stoop, where he told her what they were up

against, knowing full well that she'd keep all this to herself. He wasn't surprised at how she took the news.

"Damn Jake Mulder," she said. "And I'll tell him so to his face when I see him, and that's for sure. He didn't have no reason, not the way Dan has. Even so, I'd hate to be Dan and live with myself."

"I guess he thinks more of Bob than he does of himself."

"Well, the hell with it," Kate said. "You and me'll get up in front of that jury and speak our minds, and from me, it'll be plenty."

"Sure," Frank said. "But I can't see that it'll do much good.

"You're not giving up, are you?"

"You know better than that," Frank said. "But there'll be two of us saying one thing, and the rest something else. Figure it out for yourself."

She nodded.

"I know. It'll be tough. Stay for supper, Frank?"

"Might as well, I guess."

She put a hand on his knee.

"Don't say it like that. I'll be sitting at the table with you."

"There's other places I'd rather have you with me."

"All right, Mister Smarty."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and got up. "I got a hankering to use my muscles, so I'll work that churn for you while you're fixing supper."

It was full dark when he left Kruse's place. An hour later, he turned into his own yard, sensing at once that something was missing. Then he knew what it was, and as he stripped gear from his horse he gave a low whistle and called, "Here, Portia!"

The collie did not show herself, and a little frown gathered between Frank's eyes, and he had the feeling that all of his nerves were stretched too tight. He turned the horse into the corral, closed the gate and went to the barn where he found a lantern and lighted it. The long shadow of his legs moved in the bobbing yellow glow as he came outside; the edge of the light touched the chestnut shape of the collie, and three strides brought him to her side. He knelt down, saying "Portia," as he turned the still-warm body and found the wound in her side, and a stiffening rage made his hands shake.

He carried her into the barn, then took his lantern and made his rounds of the place, and he somehow wasn't surprised when he saw the black bulk sprawled in the bull pen. *That too,* he thought dismally.

The bull had been shot four times, and when he saw the matted blood around the small holes, Frank knew a sudden fear. Grabbing the lantern, he ran out into the pasture, coming upon his Herefords near the far fence, placidly chewing their cud.

He breathed with relief, and then for the first time became aware of himself, and the target he offered in the lantern's glow. But common sense told him that if Ernie wanted him out of the way, he would have been shot at before this, so he didn't douse the lantern but carried it back to the house where he got his rifle and a blanket, his rage boiling. *Let 'em try for my cattle now,* he thought, spreading the blanket in the pasture and sitting down. *And I just hope to hell they do.*

He buried the collie at dawn. He came back and hitched his mules to the bull, pulled it onto the stone sled and then hauled the carcass to a rock-ribbed draw a mile from the house. Halfway home he looked back and saw buzzards circling against the blue of the sky, and his mouth thinned down to a gray line.

He boiled coffee and drank two cups, then saddled up and rode for town, an air of grim purpose about him. Passing Carter's place, he saw Bob wheeling a buckboard out of the yard, and he waved a greeting; a half hour later Twentymile took shape, its main street crooked as a hinge.

The deputy sheriff's office stood to one side, its small jail in the rear. He racked his horse out front and went inside, finding Jackson at his desk. The deputy was a stocky, blond young man, who had taken the job after Frank quit.

"Well," he said, giving Frank a close look. "Thunder storm heading this way?"

"No sign of it."

"From the looks of it, you're the storm," Jackson said. "Sit down, Frank. What's on your mind?"

He listened quietly as Frank told him. Then he nodded slowly.

"Makes sense," he said. "But you can't prove Ernie was behind it."

"The hell with that," Frank said angrily. "I just want you to get the straight of it, is all, before I call him on it."

Jackson's eyes touched Frank's gun. He stretched and yawned, getting up.

"Well, you won't have far to go," he said, taking aimless steps around the room. "He's over at the saloon. Two of his men are with him. Been there all morning."

"Waiting for me," Frank said bitterly.

"Iowa's there, too."

"He's Ernie's man."

"Sure," Jackson said, passing behind Frank. "But you'd never get Ernie to admit it."

"The hell with him," Frank said. "It's Ernie I want—"

He was getting up when Jackson took a step and lifted the gun from his holster, turned swiftly and put it in a desk drawer, then slammed the drawer shut.

"What the hell," Frank said. "Give me my gun."

Jackson sat on the desk.

"Nothing doing."

"All right," Frank said. He stood on the balls of his feet, a big man, a wooden expression on his sun-darkened face. "Then I'll have to take it away from you."

"Better not try it," Jackson said quietly.

Frank balanced there as their eyes locked, his temper short, an edge of violence smoldering in his gray eyes. Then he eased back on his heels and gave a long sigh.

"I won't," he said. "I just this minute put myself in your boots, and knew I'd have done the same thing."

"Go in that saloon packing hardware and you'll come out feet first," Jackson told him.

"Maybe not," Frank said. "But I still aim to see Ernie." He went to the door and turned. "I aim to take a dog and a bull out of his hide."

RAGE HAD its way with him as he headed up the street, though he realized that Jackson had been right about not being able to prove anything against Ernie. But that didn't make any difference right now, and he shouldered into the saloon with his intentions unshaken. One swift glance showed him Ernie at the bar, a man on either side of him, and Iowa sitting alone at a table, absently shuffling a deck of cards. Ernie looked around and said, "Hello, Frank. Buy you a drink." There was a grin on Ernie's face, and mockery in his voice.

One of the men with Ernie was a fellow named Masters, a bull-like man with a coarse face; the other was big and pudgy, and Frank recognized him as someone called Judd. He ignored them and stepped up to Ernie.

"A dog and a bull," he said. "I'm calling you."

He watched Ernie steadily, saw the big man's eyes flicker with what might have been satisfaction, before he glanced down and saw that Frank wasn't armed.

Then he said gruffly, "You're talking through your hat."

"Talk through this," Frank said, and slugged Ernie in the mouth. Then he took two steps back and waited, aware of a burning sensation between his shoulder blades at the thought that Iowa was behind

him. Still the gunfighter would hardly shoot him in the back, and he forgot the man as Ernie swore and pawed at his face, a stunned expression showing there.

Masters moved first, coming at Frank in a rush, his head lowered. Frank waited. At the last moment he took a swift side step and kicked out, his booted toe catching Masters's knee, tripping him. As Masters went down, his big body jarring the floor, Ernie said, "After him, Judd!"

Frank slugged the pudgy man in the body, coming in, and it was like hitting rubber. Ernie rushed from the side, catching Frank on the temple with a blow that made the room whirl. Masters was up and Frank dodged behind a table, caught its edge and heaved it, scattering the three men. Ernie came straight on after that, Masters and Judd to either side. Frank had a picture of men crowding the doorway as he turned to grab a chair; he raised it and flung it at Ernie in one smooth motion, the impact sending Ernie to his knees.

Judd, moving quickly, threw his weight into Frank, gripping him around the middle, bearing him toward the wall. Frank whirled and smashed his elbow full into Judd's face; he heard the man's grunt of pain, and then his knees hinged as Masters slugged him twice in the side of the neck. He felt his back against the wall and he surged forward as Ernie got back to his feet, and he lifted a booted toe, catching Ernie in the groin. A scream tore out of the cattleman and he doubled to the floor. Frank stepped forward, then whirled in a crouch, catching a chair that Masters swung at him across his shoulders. The chair splintered and broke apart, knocking Frank to his knees. Hands grabbed his hair, jerked his head up, then down sharply as Judd smashed his knee up into Frank's face, and he felt as if his head had torn from his shoulders. He lunged forward to grip Judd around the legs and a boot caught him in the ribs, knocking him over. It was Masters, and as Frank rolled he saw the boot coming toward his face. He jerked his head aside and the high boot heel ripped his ear, and pain clawed there. He heard Ernie say, his words coming with painful effort, "Let me have him!"

Frank got a knee under him, started to rise, sensing a commotion at the door, and he jerked an elbow and shoulder up as Masters clubbed a hammer blow on the back of his neck. The next moment Masters was on the floor with him, blood spilling from his mouth, and Frank had a glimpse of Bob Carter tangling with Judd. He turned his head and saw Ernie and he lunged that way at once. Ernie made a jump to avoid Frank, a look of protest on his face as if he'd just as soon call the whole thing off. Frank caught him around the knees and bore him down, the man's weight shaking the floor and raising little spurts of dust from between the boards. Frank smashed his knee once more into Ernie's groin, and as Ernie's head came up, the pain twisting his features, Frank slugged him full on the mouth with his left, then brought his right across with all of his weight behind it, catching Ernie alongside the jaw and knocking him out.

He rose then, the room whirling around him as he made an aimless turn and focused his eyes to find that Judd had Bob backed against the wall, and he hurled himself at Judd, catching the man at the belt and jerking him so hard that the pudgy man floundered backwards across the room and tripped on a chair. Frank turned to Bob. There was blood on the boy's face, but he was grinning his wild grin.

"Nice while it lasted."

Bob was armed and Iowa stood beside the door eyeing him closely.

Frank said, "We're getting out of here."

Judd was bending over Ernie, and Masters leaned against the bar, his head hanging. He raised his eyes to give Frank a sullen stare of hatred, but the desire to fight had left him. Gripping Bob's arm, Frank steered him toward the door, the small knot

of men stepping aside, one of them murmuring, "I got to hand it to you boys."

"Bob, you get the hell home," Frank said, when they were outside. "Before Ernie wakes up and makes more trouble."

"Hell, the whole town knows by now," Bob said. "What got you to tangle with him?"

"He killed Portia and my bull."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Bob said heatedly. "And she was about ready to drop a litter." He got in the buckboard and picked up the reins. "You sure you don't want me to stick with you? I mean, all this is on account of the trial, isn't it? And he might try something else."

"Get going," Frank told him. "I'm leaving town too."

Bob nodded and put his team in motion, and Frank walked on down to Jackson's office, thinking dismally that there was bound to be a break between Bob and his father. There was nothing stupid about the boy, and the minute his folks testified in favor of Floyd, he'd realize that something was wrong. He'd puzzle about it and then ask questions, and there was no doubt but what he'd wind up with the right answer.

AFTER PICKING up his gun, Frank rode out of town, heading for Means's place. Old Daniel Means came out of the house as he tied up at the porch rail, a gruff but likeable man.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked Frank.

"I tangled with Ernie," Frank said, coming up on the porch.

Means gave him a troubled look.

"That shooting sure started something."

"That's for sure. How do you feel about it?"

"How the hell do you think?" Means said. "I never did like Jack to run with Floyd. Wild bunch. Now it's a tight."

Frank said carefully, "What's Jack's story?"

Means shrugged.

"He's not saying and I didn't ask. It's his fight, Frank. But I know what my story'd be." He looked at Frank. "The boy has got to make up his own mind about this. He knows right from wrong. I just been praying he won't testify in a way to save his own skin."

Frank nodded slowly. Means was not interfering in this but letting his boy make his own fight, and that was as it should be. He rose.

"Well, we'll know tomorrow."

"Yeah," Means said dully. "Things won't be the same in this valley after the trial."

That was certainly true, Frank thought, riding home. That night he again slept in the pasture, the rifle at his side, but nothing happened. He finished his chores early next morning, took a bath and shaved and put on his town clothes, and then rode over to Kruse's place. Kate met him in the yard and kissed him full on the mouth.

"That's for taking care of Ernie," she said. Then she kissed him again. "And that's because I'm proud of you."

"Save one for Bob," Frank said. "If it hadn't been for him they'd have walloped me for sure."

They drove Kruse's buggy to town. The street was crowded.

"Lord," Kate said, "half the country is here."

"On the fence," Frank said dryly. "I guess most of 'em would like to see Floyd convicted, though."

Turning the team to park in the big lot next to the court house, he glanced at the small crowd talking below the steps and noticed Mulder and his wife to one side. Their eyes met briefly, and then Mulder looked away.

Kate said in a stormy voice, "I've got something to say to that man!" and was out of the buggy and walking fast before Frank could stop her.

By the time he tied up and got over there,

Kate was laying into Mulder, her eyes hard with fury, and Mulder was edging away, a sullenly angry expression on his square face.

Frank took Kate's arm, saying, "This isn't doing any good."

"You let me alone!" Kate said, jerking her arm free. "I haven't told him half of what I meant to say. Any man that would sell himself—" Jake Mulder and his wife were hurrying away, and Kate's voice lifted. "Look at them! I'm ashamed I ever knew them, and damn glad they're leaving the country!"

"That's enough!" Frank said roughly. He turned her, noticing three riders crossing over, Ernie in the lead, his mouth puffed, a livid bruise below one eye. His younger brother Floyd had a sneering expression on his face, a kind of cheap arrogance that said he knew the answers to about everything worth knowing. Iowa rode a little to one side as if he wasn't really with them, and Frank saw his gaze slide over and rest on Kate before shifting back to Frank.

Frank led Kate past the court house and so along the street.

"We've got half an hour. No use getting messed up before the trial, because that's just what Ernie would like."

"He looked pretty confident."

"He's got a right to look that way," Frank said. Carter and his wife came by in the buggy and both nodded, the expression of misery plain on Carter's face. He reined in.

"That was a hell of a thing to have happen yesterday," he said.

Kate said stiffly, "What'll happen when you get on that witness stand is another hell of a thing. That goes for both of you."

Clara Carter's mouth tightened.

"If you had a son you'd feel different about it."

"Maybe," Kate said. "But I'd hate to be in your shoes when he learns the truth. Come on, Frank."

From the look on Carter's face, Frank knew the homesteader was already worried that his son would learn the truth, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

"I'm sorry as hell for that man," he told Kate.

"I guess I'm a little sorry I spoke to them the way I did," Kate said. "But I'm so damn mad—Floyd is guilty of murder, and it's hell knowing he'll be cleared."

THEY WALKED slowly to the street's end and then turned back. There was a big crowd in front of the court house now, and the people drew back, forming a little lane, as Judge Morrison crossed over from the hotel and went up the steps, followed by the jury. Frank glimpsed Means and his son Jack, standing apart from Ernie and Floyd Shackleford and the two cowboys that had been at the shooting. Frank looked at his watch and saw that it was almost time, and just then a clerk opened the court house doors, and the crowd stirred. A thin-faced man wearing a brown suit and carrying a leather satchel hurried inside, and then a voice at Frank's elbow said, "That's Jorgenson, Floyd's lawyer."

Frank turned and looked at Albert Quinn, the prosecuting attorney, a lanky redheaded man.

Quinn said, "I was over to your place yesterday, but you were gone." He smiled grimly. "Did you two change your minds too?"

"Not on your life," Kate said flatly. "We're telling the same story we told you Monday, when Frank signed the complaint."

"Is there a chance?" Frank asked.

"I hate to say it, but there isn't," Quinn said. "Floyd will claim self defense and the two men who were with him will back that story. I don't know about Jack Means. The Mulders and the Carters will say just enough to make the jury think that it was

(Continued on page 100)

HUNT THE

When Jed Whitson signed on with the Bar M spread, he figured on earning his keep with his blazing sixes . . . But he didn't count on using his guns to earn his grave!

NOISE PENETRATED the veil of sleep hanging about Jed Whitson. He opened his eyes and yawned. Moonlight shone through the T-shaped door of the ancient cliff-dweller's room. Jed wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and pulled his blanket higher about his neck. *The temperature in the canyon must have dropped thirty degrees since sundown.* He closed his eyes.

The noise came again, a little louder this time. Jed sat up and braced his hands on the floor. The wind rustled through the

Jed dragged himself along by his elbows, working his way through the brush.

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

MAN DOWN!

brush on the slope below the canyon. Cold sweat began to trickle down Jed's sides.

He had lived in the Salt River country of Arizona for years and had heard some queer tales about the ancient ruins but had never paid any attention to them. He threw his blanket aside and felt for his Colt, cocking it quickly and standing up in his stocking feet. Something clicked on the slope. Jed padded to the door and flattened himself against the wall, right arm crooked, holding his Colt ready for a snap shot.

It was quiet again. Jed shrugged and lowered his arm. Suddenly he froze. A strange humped shadow was silhouetted on the packed earth floor of the room. It did not move. Sweat began to soak Jed's shirt. Maybe the eerie tales he had heard were true after all.

Then the shadow was gone. He grinned shamefacedly. Maybe it had been his imagination. He turned toward his blankets and froze in his tracks. Footsteps sounded in the next room. Something hit the floor with a thud. Jed crouched in the shadows, looking up at the little window which opened into the next room. Something scraped the wall and there was a sudden burst of yellow light and in a moment the sulphurous smell of a match followed by the odor of tobacco smoke. Ted began to feel better. *Just another man.*

"Hey, Trump! Where are you?" The voice came from down the steep slope in front of the dwellings. Jed went to the door and looked down the slope, keeping in the shadow. A man was standing in the mesquite, his saddle across his shoulder and a Winchester in his right hand, looking up at the dwellings.

"I'm here, Cob!" It was the man in the next room.

The man on the slope turned.

"Shake it, Floyd!" he yelled. "You got them horses hid all right?"

"What the hell you think I been doing down here?" The third voice came from the deep shadows down the slope.

For a moment Jed stood there with mouth agape and then he almost whistled aloud. *Trump Turnbull, Cob Lewis and Floyd Vernon! Three of the worst hardcases in the Salt River country. High riders, sticky loopers and well-known travelers on the owlhoot trail.* Jed eased back into the shadows and scratched his jaw. Tonto County had a whooping reward out for those three hombres but no one had tried very hard to get it. Deputy Sheriff Case Roswell had tried and they had found him hanging from his own riata near the East Verde.

Jed was still standing against the wall half an hour later. He stepped up on his saddle and looked through the little window. A fire burned in the firehole. From their conversation he knew they had just come from the Globe country and were heading northwest toward Prescott. Trump Turnbull sat back against the wall with a Navajo blanket draped across his shoulders, holding a tin cup full of coffee in his hand. His dark face with its black mustache was familiar enough to Jed. He had seen Turnbull more than once in Tombstone until Wyatt Earp had buffaloed the gambler and run him out of town. Cob Lewis was a big hairy man, with sandy hair and bushy eyebrows. His eyes were a startling light blue. Floyd Vernon was a little man who moved quickly and nervously, his gunbelt weighted down with two stag-handled Colts, tied tight to his thighs. There was a pugnacious look about him. Folks said he had a record of five killings and meant to push it higher. He was always dangerous; quick on the prod and vicious when started.

Cob rubbed his bristly jaw.

"I ain't anxious to go up near Prescott, Trump. I crippled a miner up there last year and they ain't forgot about it."

Floyd spat at the big man's feet.

"You yella, Cob? Afeard of miners?"

Cob rubbed the back of one huge freckled hand. He looked coldly at Floyd.

"No, I ain't yella, little man. And don't you say so, neither. I seen what them miners can do when they get riled."

The little man grinned irritatingly.

"So where do you want to go?"

"Anywheres but around there. What do you say, Trump?"

Trump sipped at his coffee, staring into the fire as though the other two didn't exist.

"We don't have to go to Prescott. I've got an idea."

"He's got an idea," said Floyd.

"Shut up!" said Cob. "He's got brains too, which is morn' you can say."

Vernon paled. He stood up, hooking his slim hands over the butts of his twin Colts.

"One of these days, Lewis."

Lewis studied the little man.

"Go ahead and shoot, you little coyote. Maybe you'd like me to turn around so's I'll get it the way you like to dish it out? Through the back?"

Turnbull set down his coffee cup and stood up.

"Damn you both! With all the smart hombres in this country I have to ride with two stupid, spitting wildcats. Shut up, dammit! I said I had an idea."

Floyd Vernon squatted on his heels.

"Then talk about it," he said sourly.

Turnbull rolled a cigarette.

"You know where Old Man Monroe has his place?"

Lewis nodded.

"Up near Cherry Crick, ain't it?"

"Yes."

Cob grinned.

"He's got a nice little filly for a daughter."

"Yeh. She'd look at you, wouldn't she?" jeered Floyd.

Turnbull lit his cigarette.

"Monroe sold off his cattle two weeks ago. He's been figuring on selling his spread and getting out of the business. Been too much for him lately and he's such a prodder, there aren't many cowpokes who'll ride for him."

"What's the deal, Trump?" asked Cob.

"Monroe never did believe in banks. Fella in Globe told me the old man has all that cash somewhere in his place. I figure the three of us might drop in and see him, take the cash and ride over New Mexico way for a time. It's getting rough here in Arizona."

"Only one thing," said Cob. "Don't forget Hal Cane is foreman for Old Man Monroe. He's a handy man with six-gun or long gun."

Floyd Vernon settled his gunbelt.

"Don't worry about him," he said quietly.

"What do you say?" asked Turnbull.

"I'm game," said Cob.

Vernon nodded. "Deal me in."

"Let's get some sleep then and get on in the morning."

JED LEANED against the wall as the three men in the next room rolled up in their blankets. He rubbed his jaw. The thing for him to do was to light out for the Monroe place and warn the old man. There was only one thing wrong. The cayuse Jed had hidden a mile up the canyon belonged to the Bar M. He had roped it out of their remuda not two days ago and high-tailed it over a ridge with .44 slugs feeling for his hide. He had meant to send the cash back for it when he reached Tucson. But Old Man Monroe was funny. What was his was really his and woe betide the man who so much as drank from his well without asking permission. Jed listened to the steady breathing of the three men in the next room. Maybe he'd better send a message to the law. Then he grinned. *Why not run off their horses?*

The moon was on the wane as Jed carefully picked his way down the slope, laden with his saddle and sheathed Winchester. Now and then he glanced back at the tall cliff-dwellings, built beneath a great overhanging wall of rock, tinted a deep salmon color from the many fires that had burned

beneath it hundreds of years ago. The facade of buildings was white in the rays of the moon, the little windows and T-shaped doors standing out in dark shadow. It was a lonely, eerie place and he wasn't sorry to leave it, particularly with the arrival of the three high riders.

Jed cached his gear up the canyon and walked back, casting about for the horses. One of them nickered as he reached the top of a steep slope. The three horses were hobbled in the hollow below the slope. He slid down toward them. One of them nickered again and then whinnied. A rock slid down the slope in front of the cliff dwellings and Jed turned quickly. A man stood on the terrace in front of the buildings, the moon shining dully on the rifle in his hands. Jed froze.

"What the hell is going on out there, Cob?" It was Trump Turnbull. He came to the door of the room and looked down the slope.

"Somethin' botherin' them hosses, Trump."

Jed shifted a little, trying to get into the shadow of a bush. The gun cracked flatly, sending the echoes flying in the deep canyon. The slug whined over Jed's head as he hit the dirt. It was damned good shooting for moonlight and downhill at that.

"What'd you see, Cob?"

"Coulda swore it was a man standing down there. A big man."

Jed inched beneath the bush and eyed the slope above him. Cob fired again. The report slammed back and forth between the canyon walls. Jed cursed. The big man had planted a slug inches from Jed's face, splattering it with flying gravel. Jed rolled to one side.

"Mountain lion," said Floyd Vernon, as he came out of the ruins and stared down the slope. "I seen his club tail."

Jed dragged himself along by his elbows, working his way through the brush. He glanced back. Cob was sliding down the slope, holding his rifle high. There wasn't any use trying to run those horses off now, for he'd get a bullet through his hide. He rolled down an incline and padded his way swiftly through the shadowed brush and stunted trees. He picked up his gear and walked swiftly to his horse, picketed in a small box canyon opening to the north. After he had saddled the sorrel he stood for a time by its head.

Hell, this affair was none of his business! The best bet for him was to get on his way, yet he didn't like the idea of those three buzzards settling down on an old man and cleaning him out of his hard-earned money. Horse stealing was bad, Jed would admit that, for he was deeply ashamed of what he had done. But Jed had never busted the law much more than that.

Jed slowly scratched himself. It was a hell of a decision he had to make. He wasn't anxious to have Old Man Monroe get his hands on him, riding the stolen sorrel. Jed led the horse across a drift of loose sand, glancing back up the canyon. There was no sign of life. It took him until an hour before dawn to reach the trail that led through a rugged part of the Mazatzals to Cherry Creek. He reined in the sorrel, hooking a leg around the pommel and lighting a cigarette. He could see the lecherous face of Cob Lewis in his mind's eye as he had mentioned the Monroe girl. Jed had seen her once, some years ago, when she was still in her teens. She had shown promise then of blossoming into a good-looking woman. It was this picture that made Jed drop his leg and touch the sorrel with his spurs.

The eastern sky was tinted rose and gold when Jed drew rein on the sorrel to water him at a branch of Cherry Creek. He looked back up the trail. If Cob had convinced Trump and Floyd he had seen a man in the brush they might have decided to get on the way at once instead of waiting for dawn. Something cracked in the timber beyond the stream. Smoke puffed out from a clump of laurel. Jed cursed as

he slid from the saddle, jerking his saddle gun free with one hand and slapping the sorrel on the rump with the other. The gun cracked again, flaking bark from a tree inches from Jed's face. He dropped behind a log, levering a cartridge into the Winchester and peered around the end of the log.

"All right, hombre! Let-go that gun! Grab your ears! Pronto!"

The dry voice came from behind Jed. He released his rifle and got slowly to his feet, clasping his hands atop his battered Stetson. He turned to see a thin-faced man standing in a clump of brush, holding a rifle waist high, muzzle covering Jed.

"Get away from that gun, you damned hoss thief!"

Jed sidled away from the log. The man was Hal Cane, foreman of the Bar M. He had quite a reputation in the Mogollon country for being all horns and rattles.

"All right, boss!" shouted Cane. A man came out of the laurels, leading a bay. He waved a rifle and splashed across the stream, snatching up the reins of the sorrel as he passed it. He slid from his saddle and eyed Jed.

"You sure it's him, Hal?" he asked quietly.

"It's him all right, Mister Monroe. I caught a glimpse of him the day he stole the sorrel."

2 Horsethief's Choice

Mark Monroe was a big man, gray of hair and eye. He had come into the Mogollon country when few other men would have dared to ranch in there. Years ago he had had a reputation of being a good man to work for. But slowly he had lost that reputation until few men would ride for him and his quarrelsome foreman. Monroe sat down on the log and clasped his hands in front of him.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" he asked of Jed.

Jed shrugged.

"I stole the hoss."

Monroe had once been king on the Bar M. Half a dozen sticky loopers and horse thieves had been strung up for daring to steal his property. Monroe had never felt any need for the law. He was a law unto himself.

"You got clean away," said Monroe, as he felt for his pipe. "We figured on trailing you at least a week. Did you get lost?"

"No."

"Then why did you come back?"

Jed jerked his head toward the southwest.

"I hid out in those cliff-dwelling ruins in Cascabel Canyon. Three hombres showed up last night. They didn't see me. I overheard them say they were coming up here to the Bar M to clean you out."

"Out of what?" Monroe lit his pipe, eyeing Jed closely over the burst of the match flame.

"They said something about you having a lot of cash up at the house after selling off your cattle."

Monroe slowly took his pipe from his mouth. He glanced at Hal Cane. The foreman scratched his jaw, studying Jed through half closed eyes.

"Who were these three hombres?" he asked slowly.

"Fellas by the names of Trump Turnbull, Cob Lewis and Floyd Vernon."

Monroe whistled. Hal Cane snorted.

"This hombre is talkin' to keep his neck from being stretched, Mister Monroe. I happen to know them three buzzards lit a shuck for the border two weeks ago. They're in Sonora by now."

Jed shook his head.

"Take me in to the sheriff," he said slowly, "for stealin' the hoss. I meant to pay for him. I would have as soon as I made a stake. It's too late now. Anyway, whatever happens to me now doesn't matter. All

I know is you'd better keep an eye peeled for those three coyotes, 'cause they're sure as hell comin' up here."

Monroe sucked at his pipe.

"What beats me is how they knew I had that money on the place. I made the deal with Charlie Spencer of the Lazy S. Him and Sam Telford, at the bank in Holbrook, were the only men outside of me, and Hal here, who knew I planned to take that cash to the house. Charlie is in Albuquerque on business by now and I know damned well Sam Telford wouldn't open his mouth."

Jed watched Hal Cane. There was something shifty in the foreman's expression.

"How'd you know for sure those three hombres were in Sonora, Cane?"

"Why, dammit! I was in Globe and the marshal told me."

Jed grinned irritatingly.

"Mebbe it was you that shot off your mouth then."

Cane moved like a cat. He swung up his Winchester and slashed the barrel sideways at Jed's head. Jed jumped back, clamping his left hand on the saddle gun's barrel and thrusting it sideways. He brought in a jolting right over Cane's heart. Cane grunted in surprise. He let go of the Winchester and dropped his right hand toward his Colt. Jed threw the Winchester, hitting the foreman on the chest and following through with a left to the gut and a right to the jaw. Cane doubled over in time to get a left uppercut that straightened him up. He staggered back to hit a tree and slide to its base, shaking his head. Jed jumped forward. Something cracked over his right ear and the last thing he knew was seeing the ground rush up to smash against his face.

Water splashed against Jed's face. He opened his eyes. Hal Cane was savagely noosing his riata. Old Man Monroe was looking down at Jed.

"We'd best take him to the ranch," he said.

"Ranch hell!" said Cane, "We've strung these hoss stealin' coyotes up before and we can do it now."

Monroe shook his head.

"I don't know whether or not this hombre was lyin' about those three men or not. But if he isn't lyin' about them it'd be a hell of a way to pay him off by stringin' him up."

Cane finished the noose and opened it.

"He's lying to save his hide. Let's get it over with."

Monroe eyed his foreman.

"Hal, I've been watching you for months now. We lost a lot of good men on the Bar M because of you and your damned temper. We take this man to the house. I'm still owner of this ranch and I'm payin' your salary. We'll do as I say!"

For a moment the two men eyed each other. Cane spat to one side and then turned on a heel. He stamped off through the brush. Jed rubbed his neck.

"Kinda hasty, isn't he, Mister Monroe?"

Monroe drew out his Colt as Jed got up.

"Get on that sorrel," he said. "Don't think you got out of anything, hombre. By God, if you're lyin' about those men, I'll put that noose around your neck myself."

THE BAR M was a solid-looking set of log buildings against a background of huge pines with the mountains looming in the background, lit up by the rising sun. Blue-gray smoke wafted up from chimneys to mingle with the leaves of the trees. A woman came out on the porch of the big ranch house as they rode up.

"Is it him, dad?" she asked, eyeing Jed. Her hair was a soft dark brown and her eyes were gray like the man who had fathered her. She looked a lot like the old man except that he sure as hell wasn't anywhere near as pretty.

"It's him that stole your sorrel, Marie," said Old Man Monroe.

"I'm glad you brought him back," she said quietly. "Where's Hal?"

"On the prod. Wanted to string this hombre up. I stopped him."

She looked up quickly.

"I'm glad to hear that, dad."

He grinned.

"I'll be honest with you. This man might have done me a favor. I don't know yet."

"In what way?"

Monroe slid from his horse and jerked his head at Jed.

"Get down," he said. He looked at the young woman. "This hombre claims three men were in Cascabel Canyon last night talkin' about comin' here to get the money I got from selling the herd."

"How could anyone else possibly know you have that money here?"

"That's something else I'm going to check on. Meanwhile this man stays here."

She looked at Jed as he dismounted.

"Are you hungry?"

He grinned.

"Usually always am, miss."

Later, in the big kitchen of the ranch house, Jed sat at the table putting away his second platter of flapjacks. She studied him over a cup of coffee.

"You don't look like a thief," she said.

Jed looked up.

"I stole your hoss."

"Why?"

Jed shoved back his plate.

"I got in a little shootin' trouble up at Canyon Diablo and had to leave there in a hurry. My cayuse broke its leg a couple of miles from here. I was broke. No time to waste. I saw the sorrel and took it, figurin' I'd pay for it when I made a little money."

"Dad says you could have gotten clean away."

He nodded.

"Like a fool I figured on tellin' him about those men. I'll admit it does sound like I'm tryin' to get out of being thrown in the calabozo but it's the truth."

She filled his coffee cup.

"If it had been up to Hal you would have been strung up."

"I can't figure out why you need a foreman on this place. No cattle. Two or three punchers. I don't get it."

Marie Monroe looked down into her cup.

"No one seems to get it. Dad was doing fine until Hal Cane came along. He antagonizes everybody until it's almost impossible to get anyone to work here. Then he talked Dad into selling off the cattle with the idea of eventually selling this place and going farther south to buy another place. I was against it but dad just can't see Hal in his true light. Lately he has been a little down on him but not enough so that he still won't listen to him."

Jed drank his coffee.

"Well, your father had better listen to me or he'll have three of the worst hardcases in Arizona down on him." He grinned at her. "What's to stop me from leaving right now? Your father isn't around."

"No," she admitted evenly. "But there has been a pistol in my lap ever since I sat down here. Please don't try to get away."

Jed shrugged.

"Every move I've made so far has been wrong. What happens now?"

"I'm to lock you up in an outbuilding,"

Jed stood up.

"I've been thrown in the calabozo before, but believe me, never by a better lookin' jailer."

It was late in the afternoon when Jed heard the key turn in the lock of the outbuilding door. He sat up on his bunk. The door swung open. Jed had been expecting to see Marie again, for she had brought him his lunch, but instead he saw the thin face of Hal Cane. The foreman stepped in, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Pretty soft," he said quietly. "A damned hoss thief getting the fat of the land instead of a rope about his dirty neck."

Jed spat.

"Speak for your own neck, Cane. I washed mine."

Cane leaned against the wall, folding his arms.

"You got me in trouble with the old man," he said.

"About time, isn't it?"

Cane studied Jed.

"What were you drivin' at when you made that remark about me shootin' off my mouth in Globe?"

Jed held out his hands, palms upwards.

"It figures. The old man said he didn't tell anyone. The other two men in the deal couldn't have done it, nor Miss Monroe either. That leaves you. Simple, isn't it?"

Cane nodded.

"Very simple. Now I've got something else just as simple." He stepped away from the door, placing his hand on his Colt. "Get outside," he said quietly.

JED FELT a cold feeling under his heart. He wanted to run but his legs felt rubbery. He wanted to reach out and clamp his big hands about Cane's neck but he knew he'd never get that far.

"You hear me?" asked Cane, shifting his weight a little. Jed nodded. He reached for his hat and put it on his head and walked slowly toward the door. "Walk toward the crick," said Cane.

Jed turned.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

Cane leaned against the side of the door.

"You and I are all alone on this place right now, hombre. I ain't forgot the beatin' you handed me this mornin'." His eyes were like chips of ice.

Jed stepped slowly backward, never taking his eyes from the foreman. He was just about to turn and sprint when hoofs thudded on the earth around the side of the outbuilding. Cane's face darkened. He quickly took his hand from his Colt.

"Stay where you are, hoss thief," he said.

Marie Monroe rode around the side of the building and reined in her horse. Her face paled as she saw the two men.

"What are you doing, Hal?" she asked coldly.

The foreman shrugged.

"Nothing. You sure are suspicious, Marie."

"How did he get out of that room?"

Hal Cane jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"I guess the lock didn't catch when you were here last, waitin' on him."

"Where have you been all day?"

"Ridin'."

She bit her lip.

"Dad pays you to work here on the ranch. Not to go riding."

He waved a hand.

"I was lookin' for a stray horse."

"Have you seen my father?"

Cane shook his head.

"Lock that man up and help me find Dad. I want him to get that money out of here."

Cane laughed.

"Why? Ain't no one goin' to come here and get it."

"You're always so sure of yourself. One of these days, Hal, you'll get your comeuppance."

"Hear—hear," said Jed quietly.

Cane's face darkened.

"Hey, you! Get in there and don't try any breaks. I'd just as soon puncture you with a forty-four as look at you."

"And you damned near did, too," said Jed under his breath.

"What was that?"

Jed looked surprised.

"Did I say something?"

The door slammed shut behind Jed. He went to the barred window and looked out. Hal Cane was standing close to Marie holding out a hand.

"What's got into you lately, Marie? We used to be friends. I was hopin' we might be more."

Her face paled as she looked at him.

"You know what I think of you."

"Why this sudden dislike of me?"

(Continued on page 101)

THE DEVIL'S RANGE

Tarver held his gun across his waist, the way Lew was holding his . . .

By LANCE KERMIT

Down the winding trail Lew Dodds rode, to gun down a killer . . . How could he know he would face at trail's end a deadlier enemy than he had counted on—himself?

THEY CAME in the dark hour before dawn. There were three of them. Lew Dodds was awake when he heard them trotting toward the house. He got up and pulled on his jeans and jammed his feet into his boots, and as a precaution lifted the Colt from its holster where the heavy cartridge belt hung across the back of the chair. A

man could never tell about night riders.

Lew was in the deep shadow of the porch when they reined in, and he recognized deputy Jed Surber's stocky shape at once, and slipped the Colt inside his jeans. Surber was saying, "Hell of a time to wake a man up—" and starting to dismount, saddle creaking, when Lew stepped forward.

"What's going on?" Lew asked. He recognized the other two now—Bob Tarver and Jim Vickers, and he said hello. "Fine time to be riding."

"By God, I might've known you'd be out here, quiet as an Injun," the deputy sheriff said, settling back into leather. "You hear any riders come by this way during the last couple hours?"

"No," Lew said. "Something happen?"

"The bank was robbed," Surber said in a sour voice. He said it had happened about midnight. Anderson, the banker, and Nolan, his cashier, had been working late on the books, the way they always did at the end of the month.

"The bandits came through the back door. Nolan wasn't there—he'd gone down the alley to Jason's after a pot of coffee. Anyway they emptied the safe and killed Anderson. Nolan got back about then, and they killed him too. We know how that happened for sure, because Ed Handley says he saw it all from the upstairs window of his saloon. Says Nolan started to run, and one of the bandits ran him down and put two bullets in him."

"That was a hell of a thing to do," Lew said. "Did Handley get a good look at him?"

"Says he didn't. Says there were three of them. But there's something else happened—"

"I ran into 'em, Lew," Bob Tarver said. "Or I guess it was the other way around. One of 'em winged me."

"How bad?"

"Took some skin off," Bob said. "Nothing to keep me out of the saddle."

"How'd it happen?"

Bob said he'd been at Duke's place, and was leaving town when he heard them coming at a run.

"It was pretty dark, so I reined over to the side of the road. Just about that time there was a shot, and one of 'em fell from his horse. I guess I yelled, and the guy took a shot at me as he galloped on by."

"I reckon it was a double-cross," Vickers drawled. "Shot that man plumb in the back of the head. Reckon they figured a three-way split was too much."

"Who was he, do you know?"

"Don't know his name, and he didn't have no identification on him," Surber said. "But I seen him in town last couple days. Him and a lanky blond-haired jasper. I figure him as being one of the two that got away with the money."

"A hell of a note," Lew said. "A lot of folks had their savings in the bank, including me." He shifted his feet, looking at the slender shape that was Bob Tarver, and he was thinking of Bob being at Duke's gambling joint, after he'd promised to quit bucking the tiger. Thinking about Martha Sanders, and how she felt about Bob, and how she hated gambling. It was hell to be in the middle of something like that, Lew thought.

"No telling which way they went," Surber said. "I sent telegrams to every law officer in the county, and we been making the rounds, asking if anyone heard riders passing. I'd like you to come with us, Lew. We can split up and cover most of the valley by noon, and meet back at my office. Maybe by then we'll have something to go on. No use chasing all over hell's half acre without we got something to go on."

"Lew and I can cover the west hills," Bob Tarver said. "That suit you, Jed?"

"That'll be fine," Surber said, and turned his horse. "Let's go, Jim," and trotted out of the yard, Jim Vickers behind him.

When they had disappeared in the dark-

ness, Bob dismounted, saying, "How about some coffee?"

"Help yourself," Lew said. "I'll finish dressing."

HE LIT a lamp in the small bedroom, hearing the iron clatter of the stove lid in the kitchen, and he thought about what had happened and was troubled. He finished dressing, buckled the cartridge belt around his waist, and went into the kitchen where Bob was stoking up the fire.

"It don't figure," he said slowly, speaking at Bob's back. "Running Nolan down that way and killing him. Or even killing Anderson."

Bob shrugged his shoulders and rose. Lew watched him with a kind of impatience. They had both worked for the same cow outfit before quitting to start their own small spreads. Lew had made a go of it from the beginning, working like ten men and doubling his herd in three short years, while Bob had spent most of his time and money in town, his holdings neglected. It wasn't only that, though, and Lew was fully aware of it. He felt kind of protective toward Bob; he always had, even after Bob took over where Martha was concerned. But sometimes he felt impatient with him because Martha was all woman and deserved a good man, not one who considered a card game and a good time more important than running a cattle ranch.

"I guess not," Bob said, as though he just got through thinking over what Lew had said.

"Makes it look as though both of them might have recognized one of the bandits."

"Hard to say." He glanced at Lew with his narrow, handsome face, and his voice turned sullen when he said, "All right, say it. You been wanting to say it, so get it over with."

"None of my business what you do," Lew said. "But I don't like it being as how it hurts Martha."

"That ain't your business either."

"I'm making it my business," Lew said. "You two figure on getting married, and by God you'd better learn to settle down and act like a man before it happens."

"Who the hell do you think you are, talking that way?"

"Man, I'm on your side," Lew said disgustedly. "Can't you see that? And when you throw your money away at Duke's place, you're only hurting yourself." He reached the coffee can down from the shelf and put a heaping spoonful into the boiling water. "Besides," he added, turning his head to grin wryly at Bob, "you're a hell of a poor gambler."

Bob glanced back at him sullenly, not answering, and took the makings from his shirt pocket and started to shape a smoke. Lew went out into the first gray daylight and crossed the yard to the small corral. He stopped in the shed for his saddle and bridle, cut his gray out of the corral and saddled up. He tied the horse next to Bob's at the porch railing, and went inside and poured himself a mug of coffee.

"Which way do you figure they headed?" he asked.

Bob shrugged. "Hard to tell. But we'd better get going."

"I guess." Lew finished his coffee. He blew out the lamp and followed Bob outside, saying, "If I was them I'd head west for the Utah border."

"We might as well head for the hills. Some nesters moved up there along Willow Creek. They might have seen or heard something."

The nesters hadn't, and they followed a trail below timber line, curving with the hills that cupped the valley, stopping twice more at outlying ranches to ask their question, and so coming finally in sight of Jeff Sanders's Cross-T ranch buildings. Lew looked at the sun that was climbing the sky and decided it was about nine o'clock, and as they rode up to the ranchhouse and saw Martha come out on the porch he had that

being-in-the-way feeling that he always had when the three of them were together.

He glanced at Bob, whose face now had a grayish, drawn look from being up all night. They'd scarcely spoken during their long ride, Bob sullenly restless as though he needed to get somewhere in a hurry but wasn't quite sure where this place could be. When they reined in below the porch, Martha smiled at them both, and then her small, tanned face took on an expression of anxiety as Lew told her what had happened.

"Good Lord!" she said, her anxious gaze on Bob. "You might have been killed. Are you sure it's only a scratch?"

"It's nothing," Bob said sullenly, and Lew saw her mouth stiffen with what might have been hurt. He had known her a long time and had spent many an evening on her front porch before Bob had come between them, so she couldn't hide much from him. He knew her for a strong-minded girl, and he'd told himself often that it was the weakness in Bob that had drawn her to him, her maternal instinct that bound them together. But telling himself this never made him feel any better.

"I haven't seen you for over a week," Martha said to Bob, as though Lew weren't there at all, or as though he were such a familiar presence that it didn't make any difference.

"I drove some cows up to the mining camp," Bob said sullenly. Then, his voice rising, he burst out, "I told you I was going to. You know I got a contract to supply their beef."

LEW CLEARED his throat and looked away, knowing now what was eating Bob. He had sold some beef to the mines and had come right back to lose the money at Duke's, and now he was mad at himself and the rest of the world for having been a damn fool.

Bob said in that sullenly angry voice, "Let's go. We still got a lot of riding to do," and rode off across the yard. Martha looked at Lew with a stiff face, and Lew thought no woman should ever show that kind of expression because of a man.

"Well, you're getting something," he said roughly. "You asked for it and you're getting it."

"I thought you were his friend."

"I'll side him, if that's what you mean." If he was going to be on the outside looking in, he might as well make it final. "But I hate to see you make a mistake. You want to mother something, get married and raise a batch of kids."

Her eyes flashed fire and blood rose up the V-shaped open man's shirt she wore, and flooded her face.

"You can't talk to me—"

"The hell I can't," he said, feeling suddenly triumphant. "I got nothing to lose." He grinned at her wickedly. "Maybe that was what was wrong between us. You trying to be a little mother, and getting mad when I wouldn't play." He wheeled his horse and grinned back tauntingly at the blaze in her eyes. "So long, little mother," he said gleefully and galloped after Bob Tarver.

They rode as far as Jorgeson's Crossbar outfit, which lay deep in the west hills. Beyond this, and far across the border, was mountainous country, heavily timbered and canyon scarred. Lew looked back thoughtfully as they left Jorgeson's place.

"A man'd play hell crossing those mountains without supplies. Guess maybe they didn't come this way after all."

Bob grunted but didn't answer. Then when they came down out of the hills, he reined up, saying, "I've had enough. I'm going home and get some shut-eye."

"All right," Lew said. "I'll ride into town and talk to Surber, see what he has to say."

Bob swore suddenly and for no reason, thumping his fist on the pommel of his saddle. The muscles along his jawline

twisted into little knots, and his red-rimmed eyes held a smoulder of gray rage. Then he caught Lew watching him and his shoulders slumped and he said lamely, "Hell, I guess I'm just beat down."

"Sure," Lew said in a soothing voice, embarrassed to see a man so on edge. Bob put spurs to his tired horse and galloped south without another word, toward his small spread which lay an hour's ride away. Lew watched him out of sight before continuing on to town.

He had still a few miles to go when he met up with Ed Handley, the saloon keeper. Handley was a withered gnome of a man who rode one of the biggest horses in the valley, as if this made up for his lack of size, which it didn't. He was a tight-fisted, selfishly proud man who sold the worst rotgut in town and had a reputation for shady deals. He grinned wolfishly at Lew and asked if he and Bob Tarver had cut the outlaws' trail. Lew said no, and Handley said, "Be a lot of hell raised in the valley. Town's already filling up with folks that had savings in the bank. They got Surber sweating."

"Is he back?"

"Got back just before I left on my ride."

"He said you didn't get a good look at the outlaw that shot Nolan," Lew said.

"Too dark," Handley said, grinning wolfishly again. "You reckon they'll ever catch the one with the money?"

"One?" Lew asked, puzzled.

Handley looked blank for a moment. His tongue darted out and wet his lips, and then when he grinned it was not in any wolfish way, but like a man who was using the grin to hide behind.

"Two," he said. "I just figured one of them would be carrying it, is all. Well, I'll see you later, Dodds," he said, and rode away.

Lew frowned after him. Handley had made a slip and it had thrown him, which meant he knew more than what he'd told Surber. Which could mean, Lew thought, that he had recognized one of the outlaws and was maybe waiting to see which way the wind blew before speaking his piece. It was something to consider. There was no doubt a lot of money involved, and Lew felt that if at all possible Handley would collect his share rather than turn it over to the law. He had a half notion to follow the saloon keeper, but changed his mind and continued on to town, turning his thoughts over in his mind.

Bob Tarver rode home, his thoughts frantic but sluggish in the weariness that clung to him like a sodden blanket. He felt like he was trying to claw his way through a nightmare and would wake up any minute to the utter relief that nothing had happened. Not the meeting with Beuhler and Lanier at the mine, that had sparked the plan that had haunted him for the past three months. Not the sitting in at the poker game in Duke's place, where he had lost more than he had bargained for, making it impossible to back out of the plan which by then had included Beuhler and Lanier. Not the killing of Anderson and Nolan, the worst part of the nightmare in which both had recognized him. Anderson, when the banker had put up a fight and had torn the bandanna from Bob's face, leaving him naked as a jaybird, or so it had seemed. He had no trouble at all remembering the look of utter disbelief on Anderson's face, followed by one of complete horror when Anderson realized that within the next few seconds he would be dead. Not the running out of the back door, maskless, straight into Nolan, who had heard the shot and stood there as if his feet had grown roots, before he uttered a strangled yell and took off down the alley. Not following Nolan and shooting him twice, running back to the horses, mounting with frantic haste, galloping out of town and then doing automatically what he had planned to do from the moment he had talked to Beuhler and Lanier.

He had shot Beuhler and had fired at

Lanier, who galloped ahead with the money in the gunny sack tied to the pommel of his saddle. Then Beuhler's horse, panic-stricken, had gotten between them, and he had jerked his own mount to a hoof-pawing stop to avoid a collision, and had been thrown from the saddle. By the time he caught his horse and mounted, his arm bleeding where he had cut it on a rock, Lanier was out of sight and hearing, and men came running from town.

From then on the nightmare had taken on a quality of reality. He knew where he stood and his lies covered him. Several men had seen him at Duke's less than half hour before, when he'd said he'd had enough and was going home. It had seemed only logical to join deputy Surber, as in this way he would be covered completely, while still having the chance to hunt for Lanier, who no doubt was making tracks out of the country as fast as his horse would carry him.

He wondered now if he had hit Lanier. Thinking back through the nightmare, he had a vague picture of Lanier jerking in the saddle at the shot. It was hard to remember. Maybe he had been hit. If only he knew for certain, or had an idea which way Lanier was heading. He knew damn well that, if caught, Lanier would talk, which meant he had to get to him first, if at all possible. *Maybe I'm putting a noose around my neck,* Bob thought. *Maybe I'd better get while the getting's good.* If only he knew where he stood!

LANIER HAD headed west out of town, but that didn't mean anything. But if he was hit at all, at least badly enough to have lost some blood, he would have to hole up somewhere. And, as Lew had said, a man heading into the mountains would need supplies. If only they had got a lead as to which way Lanier was really heading.

He had picked up the road leading to his ranch and was thinking about it wearily, with that nightmarish quality that lies between sleep and waking, when he became aware of the old, mule-drawn covered wagon coming toward him. *More damn nesters,* he thought automatically, hating them suddenly for no good reason. A stocky man with a red face and a sandy mustache drove. Beside him, the woman's skin-and-bones face was almost hidden beneath the calico sunbonnet, and the usual half-wild faces of three or four kids appeared at the open hood behind the old folks. Bob Tarver made to pass them without as much as a nod. But then, because he knew they must have crossed the mountains, he reined in long enough to ask his question. The farmer listened quietly, running a finger inside his mouth as though exploring a cavity, and finally nodded.

"Feller come by as we broke camp this morning. Tall, skinny feller with yeller hair. Bought some grub off us."

"He was hurt," the woman said in a nasal voice. "I seen it and asked him." Her button eyes blinked at Bob Tarver. "I told Clem, I said, 'That man's been shot, and that's for sure and certain.' Had blood soaked through his shirt down along his ribs. Looked peaked, and when I asked him he says he fell on some rocks."

"Ma fixed him a bandage," one of the kids said.

"Shut yore mouth," the farmer said, not turning his head. "He was a beat man," he told Bob. "Plumb tuckered out."

"Where was this you met up with him?"

"I reckon about ten miles back, up there along the trail. Last we saw of him, he was heading straight west."

Bob Tarver jerked his head for thanks and put his tired horse into a gallop. He had what he wanted, but he knew he would have to act very carefully on the information. He sent his mind ahead, into the mountains that he knew as well as any man, and thought that if Lanier stuck to that dim wagon trail he would eventually come across one of Jorgeson's line shacks

in the high meadows. Hurt, he might rest up in one of them, and at the thought Bob Tarver burst suddenly and completely from the nightmarish web that had enclosed him and came sharply awake. It was still not too late. A pot of coffee, a fresh horse, and he'd be on his way. For once luck was on his side. Once he was rid of Lanier and had the money, he'd be set for life. At least, he thought, grinning widely, he'd be in the saddle long enough to where he could get started in something else besides the cow business. It would be best, he decided shrewdly, thinking ahead, to get clear to hell out of this country. He thought momentarily of Martha with a distant sense of shame that annoyed him more than anything else, and by the time he turned into the weed-grown yard and slid down wearily outside the make-do pole corral, he had forgotten her completely.

He had unsaddled, had forked some hay to the horse, and was sitting limply in the one-room shack waiting for the coffee water to boil, when the door opened. He sat straight and froze in that position, staring wide-eyed at Ed Handley. And his mind froze on the terrible thought that in all this he had not once considered Handley, but had stupidly taken it for granted that the man had not recognized him in the alley. But seeing Handley's wolfish grin changed all that suddenly, put the naked knowledge completely between them as though they had spent an hour talking it over.

"Well," Handley said, settling his thin back against the wall, his right hand buried deep in the sagging pocket of his coat, the wolfish grin never leaving his face, "well, I figured to find you either asleep or packing to leave after all the excitement last night."

Bob Tarver's jaw fluttered as though it had become unhinged. At last, that same flutter in his voice, he said, "Why, I was just fixing some coffee, Ed. I—"

"Where is it?" Handley said, his voice suddenly low but clear and certain. Before Bob could answer, he added, "Don't fool with me. It was you that killed Nolan. I saw you clear as day. And if you got any ideas, forget 'em, on account of I wrote it all out and put it in my safe. They find me with a bullet in the back—"

"You can't prove nothing!" Bob Tarver burst out, suddenly unfreezing with the heat of heart-pounding terror.

Handley chuckled dryly. "I ain't as stupid as some folks might think. You think I don't know these other two fellers worked part-time at the mines? You think the deputy ain't gonna find it out? You think he ain't gonna find out that you known 'em up there, and lost your beef money more than once at the mining camp games? You think he ain't gonna add two and two after you done told him you didn't know the very jasper you shot in the head?" He paused. "Where is it?"

Bob Tarver's throat was suddenly dry and scratchy as if somebody had poured sand down it, and he couldn't swallow, his thoughts frantic as the wild-beating wings of a bird that is being held by the legs before it is released.

"I ain't got it," he croaked at last. "Lanier—the other one—he took off with it. Why do you think I've been chasing all over hell after him?"

Handley studied him shrewdly, silently, searchingly.

"I don't believe it," he said finally and flatly. "You had this figured. You wouldn't be damn fool enough to let him carry the money."

"There wasn't no say as to that," Bob Tarver said, the wings fluttering in his voice, a thin edge of his brain telling him he would have to do something about Handley. "I figured there'd be time later, and then I had this trouble with Nolan—"

He broke off and there was a little silence. Fire crackled in the stove. A bubbling sound came from the coffee pot as the water started to boil. Bob got up and went over to it, saying with forced anger, "He

got all of it in that damn gunny sack. Must be close to fifty thousand." He put coffee into the pot, muttering to himself with forced outrage, feeling Handley's eyes probing his back. He'd have to take the chance, is all. Once Handley got back to town, he might talk. A hell of a chance but he had to take it. Suppose somebody heard the shot? He felt the wings flutter in his stomach now.

"You got any idea which way he headed?" Handley asked.

Tarver swung toward him. "How the hell would I know?" He made a gesture toward the window. "He could be anywhere—"

IT WAS a chance but it worked. Handley's eyes shifted to the window as though he expected to see Lanier right outside. A kind of desperate sob came from Tarver as he made his draw and fired. Handley reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. He even fired the gun in his coat pocket, the pocket jumping as if it contained something alive, and then the bullet smashed through his thin chest. He looked at Tarver for a startled moment. Then the wolfish grin appeared on his face as though he still had an ace up his sleeve, and then it became just a foolish grin, and then nothing as he went suddenly limp and pitched to the floor.

Tarver dragged in a sobbing breath, his chest heaving. Then panic goaded him. He went quickly outside and looked around. There was no one in sight, nothing alive and moving except Handley's horse, which Handley had tied around back by the shed.

It took him ten frantic minutes to saddle a fresh horse, to sling and tie Handley across the saddle of Handley's own big horse, and to gather a few odds and ends of food into a bag. His goose was cooked here and he knew it. But there was still Lanier and the money, and he meant to get both.

He rode, leading Handley's horse with its dead burden, up the long draw that wound behind the house and into the nearby hills. Once out of sight of the house, some animal caution made him dismount and climb a short, steep slope to look over his back trail. A rider showed in the distance, coming at a trot toward the house, and he had no trouble in recognizing Martha. His heart pumping with excitement, he hurried back to his horse and set off at a lope toward the nearest timber, still leading Handley's horse. He wondered dismally if Martha had heard the shots.

Martha thought she had heard what might have been a shot. She told Lew this when he rode up to Bob Tarver's house about twenty minutes after she had arrived.

"I guess not, though," she said. "Unless it was Bob killing a rattler."

"Where is he?" Lew asked carefully.

"I guess he's around somewhere," Martha said, as though part of her was still puzzled about the shot. "At least he's got coffee boiling. He would hardly go and leave a fire burning in the stove and take a chance on burning his house down."

Lew looked at her carefully, and then said carefully, "It's not his house, Martha —not since last night."

She stared at him with obvious disbelief.

"He lost it last night at Duke's," Lew said in that same careful voice. "The works. The money he got for his beef, and the forty odd head he had left. He hit a hard luck streak and passed out IOU's."

"But—the house—"

"This shack? It isn't worth anything, and you know it. And his lease on the land only runs another month."

"What makes him like that?" she said as though asking herself, not Lew.

Lew slid down and tied his horse. In that same careful voice he said, "Some men can't cut it on their own. They're fine when they got a boss on their tails, but once they're their own boss they won't stick to business."

"You stick to yours."

He ignored that. "I come by because Surber asked us to make a swing north. He and Vickers didn't cut any trail, either." He paused. "They found out who two of 'em were. A man from the mines recognized the dead one this morning." He paused again, meaning to say more, but he changed his mind. "You say there's coffee?"

She turned and entered the shack, and Lew walked over to the corral and looked inside the shed. When he came back he said, "He took his bay. I reckon he's checking on his cows."

"Oh, Lord," she sighed, as though she were exasperated with a child who had misbehaved. "I want to help him. He needs help."

"Sure."

"I guess I could talk Dad into giving him a job."

"I guess."

He leaned against the wall and looked at the toes of his boots. Then his face stiffened. He emptied the mug and handed it to her.

"Let's have some more."

When she turned to the stove he bent down and rubbed a finger in one of the three dark spots, where flies had gathered. He straightened and looked at his finger, and it was red.

"I reckon I'll go hunt him. You might as well head home, Martha. We'll likely be out the rest of the day."

"I suppose so." She was upset, he noticed. Angry with Bob, with herself. He wished he knew what to say, but she was a woman who'd rather give sympathy than accept it. There was a lot to her, and it was her nature to give rather than take. He realized suddenly that it was this, rather than Bob Tarver, that had come between them. He was not a man who enjoyed having a woman baby him. The thought of her being that way angered him. She was watching him, a soft smile on her mouth.

"You're mad."

"The hell with it," he said savagely. "I know you. What you need is half a dozen kids pulling at your skirts. That's what you were born for. Come on, let's get out of here."

"Don't boss me."

"That's something else you need." Lew suddenly stepped to her and swung her against him. "You're all woman, and what you need is a man to make you realize it."

He bent his head and kissed her with a man's arrogance, roughly and with certainty. Her fist hammered at his chest, but Lew gripped the wrist and twisted it until she gave a low moan of pain. When he released her and stepped back she looked at him with a flushed face, and he grinned.

"You'll do in time," he said. "Now get going."

HER EYES blazed but she went out ahead of him. She put a booted toe into the stirrup and swung up and turned her horse, looking down at him. Their wills met halfway and clashed, and she said, "Damn you," in a choked voice and galloped out of the yard. He mounted his own horse and rode up the draw, trying to forget the feel of her in his arms, to put his mind on what had happened since morning.

A hell of a lot, and some of it he didn't like. Neither did Surber, especially that part about Bob saying he didn't know the dead bandit called Beuhler.

"Damn funny," the deputy had said. "The feller that identified Beuhler says he's seen Tarver sitting in games with him at the mining camp."

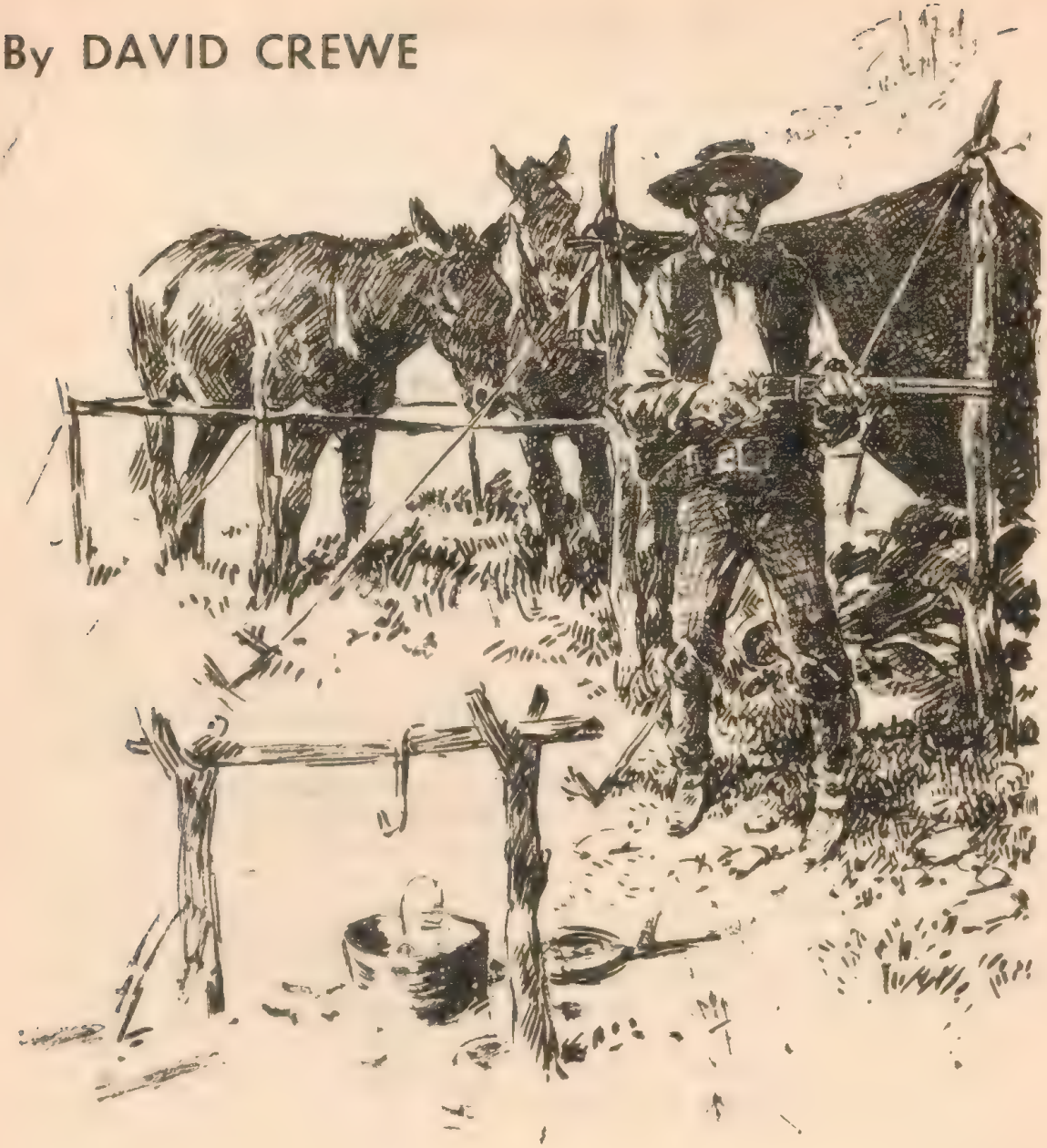
"It was dark last night. Could happen Bob made a mistake."

"Possible."

Now, riding up the draw, Lew read sign. Two horses had come this way recently. And he was thinking of that nester family he'd met at their nooning, the nester saying another man had asked after a loner riding the mountains. According to the

(Continued on page 109)

By DAVID CREWE



Gamblin' Spade Pierce liked it best when the odds were long and the stakes high . . . Now, face to face with a blood-hungry killer, Spade held the low card in this grim game of death!

BLOOD MONEY

A man appeared from out of the leanto . . .

SPADE PIERCE, known in New Orleans as a man who never made a bet unless the odds were in his favor, wished he were back in the deep South, instead of walking through a mining camp cemetery in the wilds of Colorado. He cussed himself for ever listening to Willie Jefferson.

Sunny Sunday morning; high blue sky; jagged mountains wherever he turned. Made a man feel ant-sized. The camp was

a scatter of board shacks, log cabins, tents. Hard to imagine that untold wealth passed through the place. Spade sighed, fingered the last gold double eagle in his pocket, and continued to check names on head boards.

Folks didn't last long in this country—not according to the dates carved on the slanting boards. Spade supposed that if a fever didn't get you, a bullet would. He moved on—ah, there it was!

Ramsey Jefferson—March 11, 1866—April 20, 1888.

Dead two months, at the age of twenty-two, just as Willie had said. Spade looked at a glass vase in a metal holder poked into the mound. A few wilted flowers hung limp over its edge. His hawk face took on a thoughtful look. Ramsey was supposed to have struck it rich. If only the dead could talk!

The sound of hoofs took his attention. An old crowbait plodded up the hill from town, buggy trailing dust. A woman drove. Spade clasped supple fingers behind his back and strolled on between the graves. Maybe—just maybe, there was something to what Willie had told him. They had met on the stage out of Denver and this lad—all hands and feet, and hair the color of wet straw—this lad ogled the mountains and couldn't talk enough.

Born and raised in Ohio. Had a letter from big brother Ramsey, saying he'd struck it rich. Had another letter that reached him a month later, from one Jennie Jones, saying Ramsey was dead and asking Willie to come out to Colorado. Willie was full of wild dreams. Seemed to think there was a fortune waiting for him at Crooked Creek.

A three-day trip from Denver through the deep and wooded mountains, and a whiskey drummer for company. Drummer said, "Been a year since they made the first strike up there. Now it's boom camp trying to become respectable. Hell of a note, what with no law. A man prospecting in that country had better keep a gun handy, or he'll end up with a bullet in his back and his gold gone. . . ."

Spade wished he were on an eastbound train instead of a jolting stage heading West. But after a prolonged bout with the gambling hells in San Francisco, and then meeting up again with Cleo Malone—was that woman following him around?—he'd needed a stake. And Crooked Creek, where there were hundreds of clumsy-fingered prospectors and miners, should be ripe for the picking.

They were three hours out of Denver, and Spade was dreaming of New Orleans and trying not to listen to the lad making big of this damned country, when bandits jumped them—a common enough danger at that time and place. The driver whipped his six-span team into a tearing gallop. The messenger fired his shotgun once before a bullet toppled him from the box. Shots riddled the coach. Killed the whiskey drummer and perforated his sample case. Willie gasped and slid to the floor, a bullet in his side—and Spade pistoled that close-riding bandit from his mount. It was enough to scatter the rest.

The stage turned back to Denver. Spade kept pouring the drummer's samples down Willie's throat, now and then taking a snort for his own good. *To hell with this country!* he told himself drunkenly. He was taking the next train East.

Willie thought he was dying, what with jolting along that rough road. Eyes begging like a hound dog's, he asked Spade a favor. Wanted him to find out what he could about Ramsey, about the fortune in gold. Offered Spade a cut. Asked Spade to take the letters, to look for Jennie Jones.

Maybe it was the whiskey. Or maybe because the lad wasn't wrong about that fortune. Spade thought about the lone double eagle in his pocket. Hardly enough to win him a seat in a game, and if it was, and he didn't win right off the bat. . . .

So, back in Denver, he'd stayed around long enough to see Willie in a doctor's care,

and then had caught the next stage West.

He'd arrived less than an hour ago and had carried his small valise up Cemetery Hill to see if Ramsey Jefferson really was planted there. First things first.

THE WOMAN had parked the buggy and was coming toward him. Girl, really—about eighteen, slender and blonde, a gather of flowers in her arms. Spade bowed with old world courtesy. and she smiled as though she appreciated his manners. He watched her kneel at a grave, the sun striking her hair, making it sort of golden. And then he took a step forward—by all that was holy! She was putting the flowers in the vase of Ramsey's resting place!

He came up quietly. His long shadow crossed the mound, and his voice was soft.

"Do I have the honor of speaking to Miss Jennie Jones?"

She rose slowly, warily.

"You have."

Spade took the letters from his pocket, Ramsey's and her own, and told her what had happened on the stage.

"The doctor said it'll be at least a month before Willie is well enough to travel. So Willie asked me to—ah, take charge of his resources here."

Jennie tapped the letters on a fingernail, eyed Spade coldly, suspiciously.

"I don't know where Willie got the idea that there are any resources," she said finally.

"Read Ramsey's letter."

"I know what's in the letter—Ramsey wrote it at the house the last time—" Her small chin trembled a little "—the last time he was there. He was murdered and robbed, Mr. Pierce!"

So that was it! He'd come here on a fool's errand.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Was anything done about it?"

"There is no law in these mountains," Jennie said bitterly. "Ramsey isn't the only prospector who's been murdered and robbed in the past year. We—my Uncle Judd, and a few others—suspect a certain man of being behind these murders, but we have no proof."

"A local man?"

"Jason Jordeen," Jennie said, through clenched teeth. "He runs a saloon and gambling hall, and sometimes he stakes prospectors who've gone broke in his place."

Spade nodded. He said gently, "You and Ramsey were in love?"

Her eyes moistened.

"We—were planning to marry."

Spade shifted his feet, uneasy in this girl's presence. Damn his luck! He said, "Was it generally known that Ramsey had struck it rich when he—"

She was shaking her head.

"We knew it—Uncle Judd and I. And old Andy—he was prospecting up there at Gold Creek. But—" She broke off, gave him a searchingly thoughtful look. "This is hardly the place to talk. Would you come and have dinner with us, Mr. Pierce?"

The thought of a home-cooked meal was tempting. Spade picked up his valise where he'd left it and followed Jennie to the buggy. She and her uncle ran a restaurant, but were closed Sundays, she told him. Their cabin stood near Crooked Creek, perhaps a quarter mile from the camp. Uncle Judd, a flinty old timer who walked with a limp, came outside as they drove up. Jennie introduced them, saying, "Willie sent him. Uncle Judd. Willie was shot during a stage holdup, and he's in the hospital at Denver."

Uncle Judd looked Spade over.

"Friend of Willie's, be you? Come to help us catch a snake?"

"Well, I—" Spade began.

"You listen to me, son! Ramsey was a good man, and when a good man is murdered, other good men have got to do something about it. You ain't dressed up to be no prospector, but—"

He hammered a fist into his palm, his old eyes raging.

"It'll take a stranger to get around that slick-eared Jordeen! He staked Ramsey—something we didn't know until after Ramsey and Jennie got to sparking. He's got a couple gunslicks on his payroll—Blackie and Jules—who'd as soon as not shoot a man in the back, the way they got Ramsey. They know these mountains, ride 'em and keep their eyes open, waiting for lone prospectors to come in with their dust. Only thing, we ain't been able to prove it—son, are you with us?"

Spade spread his hands.

"I'm no prospector, so what do you expect me to do?"

"One look at your hands told me that," Uncle Judd said dryly. "Gambling man, ain't you? Well, ain't this a gamble? I got a plan that if—"

Spade laughed. "You better find yourself another man."

Uncle Judd gave Jennie a surprised look.

"Thought you said he was a friend of Willie!"

"We met on the stage—" Spade began.

"Man don't run out on his friends," Uncle Judd said, his eyes flinty.

Jennie was watching Spade, a hint of contempt in her blue eyes.

"I think I'm just beginning to understand why he came here at all," she said acidly. "He knew Ramsey struck it rich, and he thought he'd leave here with his poke full of dust."

Spade flushed.

"You can't blame a man—"

"Takes a snake to catch a snake," Uncle Judd said. "Listen to me, Pierce. Last time Ramsey came in for supplies, he was all fired up over finding a rich pocket. He'd already taken some out, and he give it to Jennie—some dust and a few nuggets worth around two thousand. He said he figured it'd take him a month to clean it out, and that he'd end up a rich man. So he cleaned that pocket out—"

"Are you sure?"

Uncle Judd hammered a fist into his palm.

"Damn sure! Old Andy—it was Andy who found him—Andy, he went and made sure. Ramsey had cleaned her out and had started to break camp, when they shot him. Cain't tell how much gold there was, of course. But it figures that if Jordeen was behind it—and we damn sure think so—that he'll be keeping some kind of record. So once we get to the point of proving it, we'll have us a look at his records."

Uncle Judd paused.

"Now here's where your gamble comes in, Pierce. You go along with us on the plan I got in mind, and help show up Jordeen for the snake he is and get Ramsey's gold back—well, we'll see that you get a quarter of it. But prove nothing against Jordeen, and nothing is what you'll get."

Spade needed to laugh, but something about the way this girl and the old man watched him, kept the laughter locked in his chest. He felt uncomfortable. Still—yes, damn it—still there was something about this whole business that intrigued him. Maybe this was what he needed to lift him out of his lethargy. Except for the time he'd spent with Cleo Malone, San Francisco had bored him. He'd often been bored these past years. Even Cleo had sensed it in him, had remarked about it.

New Orleans, New York—now San Francisco! she told him. No, she wasn't following him around, but she was, after all, an entertainer. Anyway, she said, the point was that she had noticed his restlessness in all those places. Was he trying to run away from himself? Why didn't he marry, settle down?

Dark and sensuous she was, pleasant to think about. But why try to change him? Parting in San Francisco, she'd clung to him, had asked where he was going. She had already—as she always managed to do after he made a killing at the gambling tables—parted him from his roll. They

were two of a kind all right! He'd no more trust her than bet on an inside straight. She wasn't fooling him. Her interest had always centered on his pocketbook.

"Well?" Uncle Judd demanded.

Spade sighed, brought back to the moment at hand. *Well, why not?* he thought. He certainly had nothing to lose—except his life, of course. Still, looking at it from a gambler's viewpoint, the percentage was on his side. And a quarter share of—of how much? Spade nodded slowly, and Uncle Judd grunted.

"Come inside, Spade. You might as well start making yourself at home, on account of you'll be here for a spell. This plan of mine covers a lot of territory. And before it's finished you'll be bait for the trap we're setting for Jason Jordeen. So we got a lot to talk about, and we'll do it while Jennie's fixing our dinner."

IT WAS nearly a month later that Spade rode toward town on a leggy sorrel, leading a pack mule. He wore boots, jeans, a canvas coat, a sweat-stained hat. His chestnut beard was two weeks old, and he was tanned a deep brown. In his pocket he carried a poke filled with dust and nuggets —it was part of the gold Ramsey had given Jennie. Bait, now, to trap Jason Jordeen.

Uncle Judd's plan was long range, sure enough, Spade thought. He'd spent four days at the cabin, keeping out of sight while Uncle Judd arranged for the horse and the pack mule. Old Andy, a wiry little prospector with a beard down to here, showed up that night to lead Spade deep into the hills. And in the morning Andy said, "Trail here leads to Divide, another mining camp. Kind of mosey in there and buy a few supplies before heading out. I'll catch you along the trail and show you Gold Creek. After that you're on your own."

It was fine country, big country. Ridge upon ridge of timber rising to high white mountains. Deep canyons, valleys laced with streams where trout begged to be taken. Spade had enjoyed being on his lonesome—something he would have thought impossible a month ago. He'd lain around taking it easy, stirring now and again to shoot a piece of meat. He'd even tried panning for gold, wandering along the creek and its small feeding streams, ever so often testing for color. It was something to see when the yellow flecks showed. A kind of excitement took hold of a man.

A different kind of excitement gripped Spade as he rode into town. He was fairly certain that no one would recognize him as the gambler who had arrived on the stage a month ago—there'd been only a few idlers at the stage depot that Sunday morning. Anyway, what with the beard and the different clothes, his appearance had altered considerably. And the chance of being recognized was part of the gamble.

Street was pretty well crowded with men, wagons, animals. Spade left his horse and the mule at the livery stable and walked to Uncle Judd's restaurant. It was mid-afternoon. The place was empty except for Jennie and—damned if it wasn't!

"Hello, Willie," said Spade.

Willie, still looking a mite peaked, gazed at Spade without recognition, then turned to Jennie who gave a sudden peal of laughter.

"Willie, it's Spade, Willie. Don't you recognize him?"

Willie grinned suddenly and shook Spade's hand. Uncle Judd, an apron around his waist, came in from the kitchen.

"Damned if I blame you, Willie. I hardly recognize him myself!"

Spade felt good to be back among friends. These were real people, finer than any he had ever known. He gave them a short summary of his month in the mountains. Uncle Judd nodded, his eyes shrewd.

"Seems to've agreed with you. Well, Spade, tonight's the test. Tie yourself up with Jordeen, and we'll have something to work on."

"What I want to work on right now is a steak the size of my hat," Spade said. "After that I'll concentrate on Jordeen."

Jordeen's saloon was big as a barn, crowded with boisterous miners, prospectors, riffraff. There was a kind of cage to one side as you entered, where a big, clean-shaven man in his middle thirties sat with a small copper scale on the counter in front of him. The sign said: *Change your dust here.*

Spade wandered over and had his first look at Jason Jordeen. *Cold-eyed customer.* Those eyes studied Spade carefully, even as the man's mouth formed a smile around the cigar. Then Jordeen took the cigar from between his teeth and said pleasantly, "Something for you, friend?"

Spade took the poke from his pocket, tossed it next to the scales. "What's it worth?"

Jordeen fingered the nuggets and poured the dust onto the scales. He weighed and figured on a scrap of paper.

"Six hundred on the nose." He looked up, eyes boring like drills, mouth smiling. "Stranger in town, aren't you?"

"Been working out of Divide," Spade told him. "Thought I'd take a look down this way."

Jordeen grinned. "Where'd you pan this?"

Spade matched the grin. "On the moon, Jordeen—on the moon."

Jordeen laughed. "Can't blame a man for trying. These are fine nuggets."

"More where they came from," Spade said, throwing in a small wink for good measure. "Plenty more." He picked up the three stacks of double eagles Jordeen had put on the counter and dropped the gold coins carelessly into his pocket. "That's drinking and supply money. Next trip, I'll be bringing in a hundred times this much."

"Interesting," Jordeen murmured. He took a cigar from a fancy vest and handed it to Spade. "First drink on the house." He added casually, "Since you know my name, seems only fair that I know yours." He offered his hand.

"Pierce. Ed Pierce."

They shook hands. Spade moved toward the bar and leaned on it with an elbow, eyes wandering around the big room. Poker being played at back tables. A roulette wheel spun, players crowded around a dice table. There was a piano on a small stage, a few house girls mingling with the customers, the smell of smoke, of liquor, of sawdust. Spade's gaze touched two men at a nearby table—they had been eyeing him. One was young and pale, with long black hair that curled thick on his neck. The other was heavy-set, with a thick-featured face. *These,* if Uncle Judd had described them right, *would be Jordeen's hired guns, Blackie and Jules.*

Another drink later, Spade was certain. Blackie had moved casually to speak with Jordeen, as though in answer to a signal. Then he had nudged his head at Jules, and the two of them had gone outside. Probably, Spade thought, to see what they could find out about him. It was a disconcerting thought. Spade finished his drink and went to find himself a seat in a poker game.

HE WAS still playing three hours later, and beginning to get worried. He couldn't lose for winning, damn it! That wasn't part of the plan. Come dark, Spade figured himself a thousand to the good, and winning steadily. Concentrating on his cards, he was scarcely aware that the room had stilled. Someone started playing the piano, a throaty voice rose in song, and Spade found himself humming softly.

Nice voice. Kind of . . . . His head jerked up, his amazement with it. The woman on the stage was tall and dusky-skinned, with an hour-glass figure. Her dress was of green velvet, cut low to the swell of her breasts, the shoulders bare. Deep dark eyes flashed fire as they touched, now here, now there, before moving on.

Spade released his breath audibly. *Cleo Malone!* Damned if that woman hadn't followed him here, too! She was looking straight at him now, then past him. *Good Lord!* Her gaze swung back, faintly puzzled, and then—then suddenly she was smiling with open delight! *Oh, damn her!* Spade turned his head quickly—and found Jordeen looking straight at him, a black frown on his handsome face.

That, Spade thought dismally, *might spoil the broth.* Once Jordeen suspected him of not being the true article—and he would once he got around to asking Cleo if she knew him—then Uncle Judd's plan would no longer hold water.

Applause shook the rafters as she finished her song. She started another, moving slowly from the stage and between the tables. Now and then she lingered in front of some miner and smiled provocatively into his eyes. Then she was looking straight at Spade, coming nearer and nearer, and was almost beside him when the song ended. Men rose, clapping wildly, shouting hoarsely. Spade saw Jordeen coming through the crowd, and then Cleo was there.

Spade leaned his head toward her, grinning widely, but his whispered words cut like steel.

"You don't know me, understand? You do not know me"

She gave a puzzled frown as Jordeen came up. Spade took her hand, gave it a hard squeeze, said in a loud voice, "Ma'am, you've a voice that—"

At Spade's elbow, Jordeen said, "You two know each other?"

Spade laughed. "Now that would be a pleasure." He grinned at Jordeen still holding Cleo's hand and said, "Introduce us and the drinks are on me."

Jordeen made the introduction in a dry voice, his eyes moving quickly from Spade to Cleo, who smiled with gay-hearted humor and said in a silken voice, "Thank you, Mr. Pierce, for the compliment that you didn't quite finish. I have a voice that—"

"Touches a man's heart," Spade said. He looked toward the bar and called, "Set 'em up, boys! Drinks are on me!"

"You seem well able to afford it," Jordeen said sourly looking at Spade's winnings. "You play a pretty good brand of poker—for a prospector."

"I guess it's just my lucky day," Spade said, grinning wickedly into Cleo's deep dark eyes, that held a faint edge of mockery—and a question. He picked up his winnings. "My lucky day," he said. "And time to quit before my luck changes."

Cleo coughed lightly and made a gesture of annoyance.

"This smoke—" She smiled and purred, "Perhaps, Mr. Pierce, you'll be kind enough to join me in a breath of fresh air."

"I think—" Jordeen began darkly, his eyes flashing angrily at Spade.

"The pleasure is mine," Spade said quickly.

Cleo excused herself, murmuring that she would get a wrap. When she'd gone, Spade and Jordeen looked carefully at each other, and Jordeen said, "I wouldn't stray too far, friend. It can be dangerous out—especially for a man with money in his pockets. And I would hate to see the young lady frightened or hurt." He nodded stiffly and walked away.

Cleo was back by the time he'd settled the bar bill. They went out, his hand clamped hard at her elbow. As they left the saloon behind, Spade released her and said harshly, "What, you little fool, are you doing here? Following me again?"

She laughed with obvious amusement.

"Not again, Spade darling. San Francisco got—oh, sort of lonely with you gone. And you did say you might come here, so—why aren't I supposed to know you, Spade? What scheme are you working on this time?"

"This time? Now look here—"

"It must be something big—you, a prospector! Good Lord, I couldn't believe the beard when I saw it. Spade, what's it all

about? And what does Jason have to do with it—"

"So it's Jason," he growled.

"He's very handsome, darling—and rich. Maybe that's why I came here—to find a rich husband."

They came to the end of town, followed the road in the moonlight through the pines. He stopped and said, "It's a scheme all right. I'm—helping some people—"

"You?" She laughed. "The only one you've ever helped, Spade darling, has been yourself."

"You don't have to believe me," Spade said bitterly. "Just keep out of it—and away from me. Forget you ever knew me before tonight. If Jordeen finds out that I'm a gambler—well, there's liable to be a burial."

"Meaning yours. Spade, I don't know what this is all about, but be careful. He's a dangerous man. He—"

"— finds you very attractive," Spade said dryly, and drew her against him. He murmured, "And so do I, so do I," feeling the lithe roundness of her body, then the pressure of her mouth against his. He pushed her from him. "You'll make out here, Cleo honey. Pick yourself a rich man and go after him. God knows you're greedy enough, and that you'll take him like you took me."

Her hand caught him across the mouth, a stinging blow.

"Why, damn your black soul!" she said.

"— like you took me in New Orleans, in New York, San Francisco. All told, it should add up to a tidy sum." He stopped, knowing he was handling this all wrong, that she might turn on him and betray him to Jordeen. But the way she'd mentioned Jordeen and a rich husband, in one breath, so to speak, had got under his skin.

"Better get back to him—to Jordeen," he said harshly. "But please—for old time's sake—don't tell him about me. For myself, I wouldn't care. It's—there's a girl, a—"

"So that's it! Some wench you've gone for head over heels! It's a wonder—"

Footsteps came toward them. Spade grasped Cleo's arms and drew her into shadow. Not soon enough. A voice—Jennie's—said, "Spade? Is that you, Spade?" She came forward and saw Cleo. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know—' '

Spade growled, "You shouldn't be wandering around alone at night. You—"

"Why, of course not, child," Cleo said sweetly. "Is this her, Spade darling? My, you're picking them young!"

"I," Jennie said, drawing herself up, "am eighteen, and old enough to know my own mind. Or to walk alone in the dark. Good night, Spade."

As she started off down the road, Spade said, "Wait! I'll walk home with you." To Cleo he growled, "Get going. And remember what I said about keeping your mouth shut."

He walked fast after Jennie, hearing Cleo's, "Damn you, Spade," following him like a threat.

HE TOOK Jennie, to the cabin and headed back to town, musing bitterly over the fact that Cleo hadn't believed he was capable of helping others. *Well, come to think of it, why should she believe differently?* Hadn't he gone into this business with the idea of making money out of it? *Yes, damn it!* He had called her greedy out of anger—when he himself carried the same brand. He knew it only too well. . . .

A scuffle of footsteps spun him. A shadow broke from a tree—short, heavy figure. More sound behind him, something caught him alongside the temple, and he spun into darkness. When he came to he was trying to struggle erect. He automatically searched his pockets. *Cleaned!* And now it came to him with full certainty that he had recognized the short heavy man as Jules. The other one—the one who'd hit him, knocked him out—the other one must have been

Blackie. He remembered Jordeen saying, "It can be dangerous out—especially for a man with money in his pockets. . . ."

Which could only mean that Jordeen was behind the attack. That man, Spade thought grimly, was setting himself up for a big fall.

Spade spent the night in the stable and woke up with his head hammering, his temple a great purple bruise. He walked into Jordeen's next day and told the man what had happened.

"Wish to hell I'd got a look at them. Too dark. But you warned me, you warned me." Spade sighed. "And me without a dime left for supplies. And that creek up there just spilling with gold—"

Jordeen's hard eyes studied Spade briefly. He took a cigar from his vest pocket and lit it, but didn't offer Spade one.

"I often stake a man," he said casually, studying his cigar ash. "But I like to know what I'm buying, to be assured that there's a chance of getting my money back. I'm not," he continued slowly, "saying I distrust you. But I've staked more than one man to have him go over the hill when he made a fair strike. So I like to know about where he figures to prospect."

"Fair enough. I'll be heading for Gold Creek country—" Spade grinned "—and points West. If that's not close enough for you, to hell with it. I'll get someone else to stake me."

Jordeen shrugged. "Don't blame you. Now as to terms—half of anything you pan out as long as the stake lasts. Let's go up to my office, Pierce, and sign the papers."

Back stairs led to a balcony overlooking the barn-like room. A door along its far end opened.

"Oh, Jason—"

It was Cleo. She broke off when she saw Spade, and her eyes widened at the sight of his bruised temple. Jordeen grinned at her.

"I'll be right with you, Cleo. A little business with our friend—he'll be leaving town today."

"Oh?" Cleo said brightly. "Going East, Mr. Pierce?"

Spade gave her a look of mockery, aware of a vast relief. The bait had been taken, the trap was set—and Cleo had not betrayed him.

"No, not East, Miss—Miss—" Spade frowned. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name."

Jordeen threw his head back and laughed loudly. Cleo flushed and stared at Spade with angry eyes.

"It doesn't matter, Mr. Pierce. I—doubt if we'll meet again." She turned and swept back into her room.

"Come in, Pierce." Jordeen was still laughing. "Let's get this over with and send you on your way."

Three hours later, Spade rode the leggy sorrel out of town, the pack mule trailing. Willie had wanted to make the trip with him, but the lad was still not over his wound, and Jennie had argued strongly against his going. Uncle Judd had chuckled.

"Better mind her, Willie. Once she's set on something, you can't budge her."

As for Cleo, Spade hadn't seen her again. Now he was thinking of Jordeen—of Blackie and Jules. Those two did Jordeen's dirty work. Spade expected them to follow his progress, taking their time in trailing him to where he meant to prospect, and keep an eye on him until he broke camp. Then, he was certain, and only then, would they attempt to kill him, sure that his pokes were fat with dust. It meant, he thought wryly, that each day in the mountains he would have to make a great pretense of panning gold.

There was on flaw in Uncle Judd's plan, as Spade had told him. Even though Blackie and Jules might be caught in the act of trying to dry-gulch Spade, it didn't necessarily mean that Jordeen would become involved. *If only. . . .*

Rapid hoof beats swung him around in

the saddle. Cleo Malone, wearing a black riding habit and astride a gray horse, came up at a pounding gallop. Spade noticed the gracefully erect way she sat her sidesaddle, but there was a scowl on his face as she reined in.

"Damn it, Cleo, do you even have to follow me into the mountains?" he growled. "Didn't I tell you—"

"Spade, damn you, come out from behind that beard and make sense! I want to know what's going on. You're up to no good. You and this mule! And having Jason stake you. If you needed money, why didn't you—"

"Ask you for it?" Spade smiled mockingly. "I see it now—you think I'm on the edge of making a big strike, and you'd like to get your greedy little hands on part of it. Well, Cleo honey, this time you're out of luck. Better stick with Jordeen. Get all you can out of him while the getting's good, because it won't be for long."

"Why, Spade, why?" she demanded. "What is there between you and Jason. And that little restaurant girl, Jennie."

"Leave Jennie out of it," Spade said harshly. He had said too much—he couldn't trust her. He touched the sorrel with his spurs. "Go back—forget you saw me—forget you know me."

"Spade! All right, Spade—I'll find out One way or the other, I'll get to the bottom of this. And when I do—and when I do you'll wish—"

Spade didn't hear the rest, didn't listen. He knew he'd acted like a fool—but he knew what he was up against, too. Doing it for a girl, an old man, a callow boy whose brother had been murdered. Doing it for himself, too—maybe for the good of his soul. Spade Pierce, who'd never once in his life thought of anyone but himself, who'd never placed a bet unless the odds were on his side. And now, for the first time that he could remember, others were depending on him, and he wasn't going to let them down.

HE'D BEEN in the mountains two weeks when old Andy rode into camp astride his burro.

"Been keeping an eye open," he told Spade. "You know that Blackie and Jules been scouting around?"

Spade nodded. "I haven't seen 'em; but I cut their sign a couple of days ago up on that timbered ridge."

"They headed back for town—should be there about now. Son, it's gonna be a close thing when it happens. You sitting here like a fat pigeon, and them hid out in timber." Andy spat a string of tobacco juice. "I don't like it."

"I won't be alone, Andy. You and the others will be backing me."

Uncle Judd, working with Andy, had taken care of that. They'd formed a committee with three other old time prospectors, all who considered Jordeen guilty of murder and robbery.

"You boys will be watching when they're ready to make their move, Andy. That's good enough for me." He grinned. "Today's Wednesday, Andy. Two weeks from now—that's when I'll break camp. That's the day we close the trap on Jordeen!"

Spade squatted at the edge of a stream, by a sand bar, rotating his pan slowly and then studying the thick yellow flakes that gleamed in the last of the sand. He washed the sand away and with the point of his knife carefully eased the gold into his leather poke. Ten days ago after Andy's visit, he had discovered this small creek and the sand bar, forming a pool, and had found that the silt of its bottom was a veritable gold mine.

He hadn't taken a fortune out of it by any means, he knew—but in ten days, if he figured right, he had taken out maybe five thousand dollars worth.

He smiled thinly, remembering that he'd often won more in one evening of poker. But there was something about taking your gold this way—out in the open, back, arms,

legs aching from squatting in one spot hour after hour, that brought more satisfaction than any winnings at gambling ever had. There was, after all, something to be said in working for a living.

The sun was lowering, slanting the last of its light through the pines. Spade rose and stretched, easing cramped muscles. He picked up his rifle and started back to his camp. A mile along the ravine, he heard crashing in the brush upslope. *A deer?* But Spade's next thought was that Blackie and Jules were closing in on him, and he ducked down, his insides clawing with excitement.

Then came more crashing. Spade peered carefully upslope and saw a head with a mane of wild black hair. The head was bobbing as the horse floundered through the thick brush. Spade heard something like a sob, then a hoarse voice calling his name.

"Spade! Spade!"

Spade said, "What the hell! Cleo!"

He was shocked at the sight of her, the disheveled hair, the rumpled and torn dress. She was riding the gray, and at the sound of Spade's voice the horse stopped and stood buckle-kneed.

"Spade!" Now Cleo really did sob. She slid from the saddle into Spade's arms and buried her face in his chest. Then she looked up, her black eyes flashing.

"Last night, Spade, I heard Jordeen talking to his two men. They're on their way to kill you, Spade, and—"

Spade groaned. "And you—"

"I tried to find this Jennie girl, her uncle, to have them warn you. But I couldn't find them, so I—I knew from what Jordeen said that you were at a place called Gold Creek, so I asked directions."

"You mean you've been riding all night and day?" Spade said, amazed. "To—warn me?" He couldn't help himself. He drew her tight against him. "Cleo honey—"

"I guess I got lost. Spade—" she drew back "—I'm hungry. Spade, I could eat a horse."

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"We'll be lucky if we live to eat another meal," Spade said grimly. He told her how they had been trying to trap Jordeen. "Enough evidence to suit a miners' court is what we need. But now—" He shrugged and told her he knew about Blackie and Jules. "The idea was to catch them dead to rights, when they made their move against me."

"You mean—I spoiled the plan!"

"He'll know you've gone, and he'll have asked questions and learned you were coming here. By now he'll have come up with an answer, and he'll no doubt sit tight and wait for our next move."

Cleo Malone sighed and leaned wearily against him as they went toward camp.

"I guess—I guess the hardest thing for me to get used to is that you're really helping these people and not expecting to get anything out of it. Spade, I thought you were up to something crooked."

"Well, I did have my eye on a fortune—at first," Spade admitted uncomfortably. "Ramsey—I didn't know Ramsey. But he must have been a fine lad. He was, in his way, helping to shape this land. He and Jennie—they were going to raise cattle. Then there's Uncle Judd, old Andy, Willie—all of them willing to spend time and money in order to see justice done."

They came in sight of his canvas lean-to, his horse and mule in the rope corral. Behind them, the gray whinnied. And an answering whinny came from the timbered slope that rose behind the camp. Spade saw a man appear from out of the leanto, and Cleo's fingers gripped Spade's arm.

"Jordeen!"

A good fifty feet still separated them, and Jordeen was saying, "You're covered from two sides, so drop that rifle.

Spade whirled Cleo at arm's length into the brush-choked bottom of the ravine, where the creek flowed. Two rifle shots cracked as one. A bullet burned Spade's thigh, and then he was down in the brush with Cleo.

"Follow me!" He started upstream on hands and knees.

"Spade," she gasped.

"Better to die fighting than to give ourselves up."

GUNFIRE SEARCHED the brush behind them. There were a few boulders ahead, and Spade pulled Cleo behind them. The sun was out of sight, but it was still light enough, and Spade raised up cautiously and waited for the next shot. It came from the slope to their left. Spade saw the thick-set figure beside the tree. He took careful aim and squeezed off his shot. Jules stiffened, dropped his rifle, tried to hold himself erect and then pitched forward.

They heard Jordeen curse and yell, "Blackie! Keep 'em pinned down."

Blackie had spotted them in the boulders. Well hidden himself, he kept a steady fire on their position. Sooner or later, Spade thought, one of those bullets would ricochet and find them. He turned his head and looked at Cleo.

"Not very healthy for you," he said roughly. "Might be better if you go over on his side. He thinks a lot of you—"

"Don't be a fool," Cleo said. "And give me a little credit. I'd rather die with you than live with—"

A bullet screamed against rock, a splinter tearing Cleo's cheek. She cried out in pain. Spade took his six-gun from its holster, changed his mind and handed her the rifle.

"Get ready. All right! Now put two shots in that general direction."

Cleo, watching him wide-eyed, fired twice. At the second shot, Spade scrambled from the boulders, up the opposite slope, ran twenty feet at a crouch and then fell flat and lay still, heart pounding. A bullet tore into the dirt at his heels. He estimated its direction, got up and ran again. He heard Cleo fire in the ravine below.

Less than a minute later, suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, Blackie appeared. He

stepped from behind a tree, a tight grin on his face, and he fired as Spade raised his gun. The bullet clubbed Spade. He fired and fired again, then saw Blackie's shirt jerk twice. Then Blackie folded forward and lay still.

"Spade! Spade, he's getting away!"

He turned, saw Cleo standing on the edge of the ravine, looked toward camp and saw Jordeen mounting a black in the trees. Too far for a six-gun—anyway, Spade's gaze was getting fuzzy.

"Shoot, Cleo! Shoot, dammit! Cleo—"

He scrambled down slope, across the ravine, as she fired once, twice, again. The black screamed. Jordeen slumped in the saddle. Spade ran up, panting.

"Jordeen, you're licked—"

Slowly — almost cautiously, Jordeen slipped from the saddle and fell on his back —eyes open and glazed, blood staining the fancy vest, the white shirt. Cleo came running. Spade put his arms around her and held her. He felt tired, beaten.

"Well, they won't kill any more prospectors," he said finally. "But neither will we ever be able to prove—"

"I'm sure we can, Spade! He—I know he keeps a small record book in his safe. It's not part of his regular records. Spade, you're hurt!"

Her concern made him feel better.

"This is a tough country—a man has to be tough to live in it. Cleo, I don't know how it happened—but you're through working in dance halls. You hear me, Cleo? I haven't much, a few thousand but—"

"Why, Spade darling," she said, wide-eyed. "Don't you remember New Orleans, New York, San Francisco?"

"And you picked me clean every time!"

"Someone had to take care of it for—us, Spade. Right now in the Denver bank—Spade, what are you trying to do! You're hurt, Spade!"

"Not that hurt," Spade murmured. "Not that hurt at all." ♠ ♠ ♠

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(Continued from page 67)

self defense. Figure it out for yourselves." He nodded and walked up the court house steps.

Jackson and the town marshal were on the porch collecting guns as a few people filed inside.

Frank said, "Well, we might as well go on in," and walked a little behind Kate, his fingers starting to unbuckle his gunbelt. It was then he heard the voice, and the words shook him.

"That Kruse girl is a right nice-looking squaw. I'd like to be the Injun to slip into her teepee."

Frank knew as he whirled that it was Iowa. He saw a blur of faces and then only Iowa's thin face, and the rage that shook him was too much, and his hand dove for his gun.

He'd been moderately fast on the draw while a deputy, but two years of farm work had slowed him down, and in this split second of time he saw the blur of Iowa's hand, the shape of the gun lifting, and then the roar of the shot exploded in his ears.

Turning, he had not offered a steady target, and in that moment of people scrambling frantically out of the way he felt the shock of the bullet tearing into his shoulder. It was as if a hammer had smashed him there, and it knocked him to his knees as Iowa fired a second time and missed. Frank had his gun up then, and he fired once, twice and then again, and in the roaring confusion he saw Iowa clutch at his belly and pitch forward onto his face. Then Kate was beside him and he was trying to stand up, but his legs refused to hold him and he felt himself spinning through a gray void.

He heard himself say, "I'll be all right. Just get the doc to put a bandage on."

"Somebody get the doc!" a voice called, and it was Dan Carter. "Frank," he said, "that did it. Clara and I are going in there and tell the truth."

"That's fine," Frank said, suddenly aware that he was sitting on the court house steps. He started to rise, but suddenly something within him snapped and darkness washed over him. . .

Kate had taken a room for him at the hotel. She told him about it that evening, saying the doctor had said that he shouldn't move around for at least three days.

"I've got the room next door, so I'll be with you."

"I'm just getting straightened around," Frank said. "What happened at the trial?"

"Floyd's lawyer tried to get a postponement, but the judge ruled against it," Kate answered. "I don't know what it was, Frank, but Iowa saying what he did in front of everybody, and then you taking him on, started something. The Mulders and Jack Means, they all testified against Floyd, and the jury was out just ten minutes before they came back in with a verdict of guilty. Then Judge Morrison made a little speech about Ernie throwing fear into people and bending them to his will. Ernie's beaten, Frank. People are no longer afraid of him. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he moved out of the valley."

"Man!" Frank said.

Kate put her hand on his cheek, a proud smile lighting her eyes.

"It was you and what you did," she said. "That's what changed everything."

"Oh, well," Frank said. And then he grinned and said, "Who's gonna nurse me when I get home?"

"I am," Kate said. "You don't know it yet, but we're getting married as soon as you can stand up in front of a preacher."

"Maybe we ought to wait till my shoulder heals."

She bent down and ran her lips across his mouth, and she murmured, "You're a strong man, Mister Smarty. And I don't think a little thing like a bullet hole will stop you from doing what you want to do."

Frank put his good arm around her and drew her close.

"We won't be long finding out, Mrs. Shannon. Not long at all." ♠ ♠ ♠

(Continued from page 76)

"You have too much influence over Dad."

Cane grinned.

"He's old. Can't think as clearly as he used to. I'm only trying to help him out."

"You're only trying to help yourself out, as you always have."

He thrust out a hand, gripping her by her left ankle.

"Marie, for two bits I'd drag you off that hoss and show you who it is I'm tryin' to help."

Jed gripped the bars and shook them.

"I'd like to get my hands on you, Cane," he said. Cane turned. "Shut up, hoss thief." He pulled at the girl's ankle. "Get down and give me a kiss, Marie."

Marie suddenly kicked out, the rowel of her spur grazing Cane's face. He cursed as her quirt lashed across his jaw and jumped back as she set the steel to her roan and galloped toward the ranch house. Jed began to laugh. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"You sure got a way with fillies, Cane," he said.

Cane turned slowly. He wiped at his face, stared at the blood and then looked at Jed. His face was white and set, marked darkly by the blood. Suddenly his right hand clawed down, coming up with his Colt. Jed hit the floor as five slugs ripped through the window to thud into the back wall. Acrid smoke drifted in through the window, wavered and began to flow out again. Jed rolled to one side and raised his head to glance out of the other window. Hal Cane was walking slowly toward his horse, tethered to a tree near the creek. Marie was on the porch of the big house staring at him. Jed stood up and waved at her from the window. He glanced over his shoulder. The five bullet holes in the thick wooden wall could be covered by one hand. He whistled softly. No wonder few cowpokes would ride for the Bar M with a madman for a foreman.

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A short man came around the side of the ranchhouse and limped rapidly toward the outbuilding. He blew an explosive breath as he saw Jed looking out of the window.

"Sure thought that crazy galoot done you in," he said. His sun-faded gray eyes twinkled. "Looks like he put the fear of the hereafter in you, you hoss thief."

"Who are you?" asked Jed.

"Limpy George. Work for Old Man Monroe toting in supplies and suchlike. Cook when we have hands." The little man tugged at his dragoon mustache. "What was rilin' Cane?"

Jed scratched his jaw.

"I got him in a little trouble with the old man. He's taken it the hard way."

Limpy looked to the west where Cane was riding through the trees.

"He always does. He's got a bad streak. Ain't wise to cross him nohow."

"Where's the old man?"

Limpy shrugged.

"How the hell should I know? I just got back from town. Marie told me to come and see if you was all right." He looked curiously at Jed. "You ever see her before?"

"Some years ago, when she was a kid."

"That so? She sure seemed concerned about you. Thought maybe you knew her better."

Jed rolled a cigarette and passed it through to Limpy, rolling another one for himself. Limpy lit the cigarette.

"Thanks," he said. "You ain't a bad hombre for a hoss thief."

"I suppose you never borrowed a cayuse when *you* were in a hurry."

Limpy grinned.

"I didn't say that. I just said you weren't a bad hombre for a hoss thief."

Jed had taken a liking to the little man. He eyed the shadows creeping across the ground.

"How many men does Monroe keep on the place?"

"Outside of Hal and me there is only Polk Yarnell and he's 'bout ready to quit. Wages are good but he can't stand Cane. I ignore Cane and he lets me alone. Besides, he knows how I stand with the old man."

"What's Cane tryin' to do, Limpy?"

Limpy puffed at his cigarette.

"He's had his eye on Marie for some time. Cane was always short in cash, long's I've known him. Gambles a lot. Likes the hurdy-gurdy girls in Holbrook and Winslow and you know how they can take you. I figger Cane thought he might hitch up with Marie and get the old man's money in time. But lately Marie hasn't exactly acted like she's in love with him. The swell-headed jackass never thought that would happen. Anyways, Cane gets the idea the old man should get rid of his cattle and sell out, and move down south."

"Yeh. I heard that from Marie."

Limpy looked quizzically at Jed.

"You sure you don't know her better? She sure seems to have taken a shine to you."

Jed leaned close to the little man.

"You take my word, Limpy, and stick close to that ranchhouse as long as that girl is in there. Keep your eyes peeled. I'm thinkin' a bit of hell might break loose around here before long."

Several hours dragged by. The yellow rectangles of light from the ranchhouse windows shone on the ground, broken now and then by a shadow as someone passed between the window and the lamp within. The moon had begun its slow climb into the heavens. Jed paced back and forth in the room in which he was imprisoned. He couldn't figure out why the three outlaws in Cascabel Canyon had not showed up as yet. He passed the door and lashed out with a hard kick of frustration.

The door swung open. He stared at it. Then he remembered he had not heard Cane lock it when he had ordered Jed back into the room. Jed stepped outside and breathed deeply. It was good to be out of the pokey. He stepped back into the shadows. He had seen the old man, Marie and Limpy George about the house before it had gotten dark but there had been no sign of Cane since he had emptied his pistol through the window of the outbuilding and had ridden off to the west. Jed padded through the darkness. He wanted a gun and a horse, and this time he wasn't taking any chances with a trigger-crazy character like Cane on the loose.

He stopped to study the corral. The low murmur of voices came to him as he flattened himself against the wall of the big stable. He mentally cursed his luck. Someone was inside the stable but there was no light. He sidled to a half door and listened.

"Who's about the place?"

The voice came from the darkness, not five feet from Jed. There was no mistaking the dry voice of Trump Turnbull.

"The old man, Marie and that crippled cowpoke, Limpy George." The second voice was that of Hal Cane.

"Where's the other hombre?"

"Yarnell? Down the canyon, looking for a stray. I told him to stay out until he found it. He won't be back."

"What about that hoss thief? The one who overheard me and the boys."

"He's locked up."

"He damned near let the whole thing out of the bag."

"I'da had him strung up if the old man hadn't turned chicken-hearted. I've got to be careful, Trump."

Jed looked about. There was no sign of Cob Lewis or Floyd Vernon.

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by you. We make a lot of gunplay. The old man gets hit by a slug. You're a hero and we split the money fifty-fifty after I make my getaway."

"That's it. Are Lewis and Vernon wise?"

Trump Turnbull laughed.

"They've been arguin' like two old wimmen. They're so damned busy tryin' to rile each other that they haven't got wise to anything. I'm sick of them both. Make sure you don't miss when you open up on them."

JED'S STOMACH churned as he heard the cold-blooded conversation between the two men. Spurs jingled inside the stable. Jed padded off, heading for the corner of the stable. He turned it quickly, passing between it and a long low shed. The moon was beginning to light the grounds about the ranch house. The stable door creaked open and Jed gripped the edge of the low roof and swung himself up on it. Hal Cane and Trump Turnbull appeared.

"I'll get the boys," said Trump, as he watched the deep shadows for a time, smashed a fist into the palm of his other hand and walked swiftly toward the big ranch house.

Jed dropped from the roof. Cane had figured craftily. Evidently his suit with Marie had not gone well. She was the old man's sole heir, and rumor had it that Old Man Monroe wasn't exactly a pauper. Cane had been slick enough to talk the old man into selling his herd and converting his biggest asset into ready cash. The attempted robbery by the three outlaws and Cane's heroic rescue of Marie, with the planned death of her father and Cob Lewis and Floyd Vernon, would make him a local hero and probably, if he worked his play right, the husband of Marie Monroe.

Cane had evidently gotten word to the three outlaws, warning them to keep out of sight until he gave them the word, thus throwing off the effect of Jed's warning to Mark Monroe. Jed couldn't take the chance on warning the Monroes again unless he could be reasonably sure they would believe him. There was only one thing for him to do. He had to throw a bar into the machinery and from the looks of things he had to do it alone. Alone, against four of the toughest characters he had ever run into.

Jed made his way back to the outbuilding where he had been imprisoned and swiftly made up a dummy on the cot. He closed the door behind him and wedged it shut with splinters of wood. They might not bother with him until after the robbery was committed. The faint sound of hoofs came to him on the wind as he finished. He darted around the side of the outbuilding into the shadows. The noise stopped. In a few minutes three figures appeared in the edge of the timber. There was no mistaking Turnbull, Lewis and Vernon. They disappeared among some of the outbuildings.

Jed ran lightly into the timber. The moon came down through the trees in silvery shafts. A horse nickered as Jed passed into a clearing. Three horses stood just beyond the edge of the clearing. Jed spoke to them quietly and pulled a Winchester from its saddle sheath. He placed it against a tree and swiftly emptied the other two saddle guns, filling his pockets with the cartridges, and then replacing the guns. He picked up the rifle and faded into the shadows, running softly toward the ranch buildings. A bunkhouse door banged open as he passed the stable. Yellow light flooded out. A small figure stood outlined in the light for a moment and then there was a flash of metal in the moonlight and Limpy George went down and lay still.

Jed raced forward. Cob Lewis was standing over the little cook, grinning down at him. Trump and Floyd were nowhere in sight. Cob turned suddenly to face Jed. Jed swung the Winchester but Cob sidestepped, smashing down his left fist on the

barrel of the rifle. He raised his Colt with his right hand but did not fire. Jed let go of the rifle and drove in a hard right to the gut, throwing up his left arm to fend off a blow from the Colt. The Colt barrel thudded against his forearm, numbing it. Cobb threw Jed back and closed in, grinning in the moonlight. Jed rubbed his left arm and threw himself sideways as Cob chopped at him with the barrel of the Colt. Cob backhanded Jed, sending him sprawling. The big outlaw holstered his Colt and dived atop Jed, knocking most of the wind out of him. Steel fibered fingers closed on Jed's throat. He brought up a knee into Cobb's groin. The fingers loosened. He threw the big man back, and leaped to his feet. Cob was on his knees trying to get up. Jed lashed out with his right foot. The high boot heel cracked against Cob's jaw. He went over backward and lay still. Jed snatched the Colt from Cob's holster. Limpy George groaned. Jeb bent over him. The little man opened his eyes.

"What the hell hit me, hoss thief?"

"You were buffaloed."

"Why'd you do it?"

"I didn't. Look over there. That hombre and two others are working with Cane to hold up the old man. Can you give me a hand, Limpy?"

"You bet!"

Jed dragged the outlaw into the house.

"Douse the light, Limpy."

Jed worked swiftly, lashing the big man into a bunk. Limpy came to stand beside him, gingerly touching his head. "What do we do now?"

Jed swiftly explained Cane and Trumbull's plan. Limpy spat.

"I've heard of coldblooded ones in my time, Jed, but this beats all."

Jed gripped the little man by the arm and guided him outside. He thrust Cob's Colt beneath his waistband and picked up the Winchester. Limpy looked toward the back of the house.

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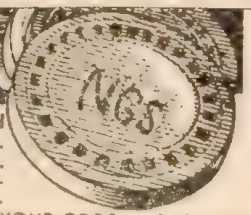

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"The lights are still on," he said.

"You want to ride for help or are you game to try to stop them with me?"

Limpy drew out his Colt and spun the the cylinder under his thumb.

"Ain't no time to run squawkin' for help. We drew this hand, hoss thief. We'll play it out."

Jed grinned and slapped the cook on his back.

"Come on then. For God's sake, be careful. All three of them hombres are chained lightnin' with a Colt."

Limpy rubbed his jaw.

"That so? Mebbe I'd better go for help after all? No—I'll stick it out. Lead on, hoss thief."

There was a sudden crash over at the big house.

"Come on!" said Jed. "Looks like the fandango is startin'!" He ran toward the house followed by the limping cook. "Go in the back way, Limpy," he said, "I'll take the front."

Jed rounded the corner of the big log building. Voices came from the living room, which was lit by a big brass harp lamp. He stepped on the porch and edged toward a window. Trump Turnbull and Floyd Vernon were standing in the middle of the room. Mark Monroe had risen from his chair near the fireplace, still holding a book in his hands. Behind him was Marie, her hands holding on to the back of the old man's chair.

"Where's the cash?" asked Turnbull.

"I'll fry in hell before I tell you," said Monroe quietly. He spoke over his shoulder. "Seems as though your horse stealing friend was right, Marie. I wish I had listened to you both."

"Talk," said Turnbull, "or I'll ventilate you and that good-lookin' daughter of yours."

"Where the hell is Cob?" asked Floyd. "Shouldn't have taken him long to buffalo that cripple."

"He'll be along," said Trump.

"You sure Hal Cane ain't around?" asked the little gunman, glancing toward the door.

"I told you he wasn't. I saw him ridin' on the trail not mor'n an hour ago."

JED HEARD a board at the end of the porch creak. He flattened himself against the wall. A shadowy figure showed at the end of the porch, and then passed a window. It was Hal Cane, six-gun in hand, and an intent look on his thin face. Cold sweat trickled down Jed's sides. It would take split-second action to keep Old Man Monroe from getting a slug in his gut, yet Jed had to wait until Cane made his play. Cane stopped outside the partially opened door and listened. Jed hoped Limpy had enough sense to wait until Jed opened the action.

Cane raised a foot. Suddenly he booted the door open and plunged into the room. Jed thrust his rifle forward, smashing the window glass. Trump Turnbull turned in surprise. Floyd Vernon twisted his body to fire at Hal Cane but Cane was too fast. His Colt cracked twice and Floyd Vernon staggered forward to crash against the table and then slide to the floor, dropping his Colt. Mark Monroe threw his book at Trump, pushed Marie against the wall and threw himself toward the gun Floyd had dropped just as Trump Turnbull fired at him. Jed fired. The heavy .44 slug smashed into Turnbull's right elbow, sending his shot at the old man wild. Monroe smashed out the lamp as Hal Cane fired once. The old man grunted and went down.

Jed kicked out the rest of the window glass and thrust his big body into the room just as Turnbull swung about, snatching out a gun with his left hand. He fired. The slug rapped into Jed's left thigh, sending him down on one knee. He fired twice from the floor. Trump stood up, clearly seen in the moonlight, and then sank down again to lie still. Hal Cane fired again. He kicked

the door open and ran out onto the porch.

Jed pulled himself up by the window ledge and gripped his rifle, the sweat of agony streaming down his face. Cane was running toward his horse, tethered among the trees near the creek. Where the hell was Limpy George, thought Hal, as he tried to lever a cartridge into his rifle. He rolled out on the porch. Couldn't blame the little man for turning yellow in a gunfight like this one.

A shadow appeared in the trees.

"Hal! Hal Cane!" the main said. He limped forward. Hal Cane turned, the moonlight flashing on his Colt.

"Limpy," he said thinly, "you aim to stop *me?*"

Limpy stood with his hands hanging by his sides.

"Yes, you polecat."

Jed raised his rifle. The foreman was a clear shot in the moonlight, but something made Jed stop. Cane laughed.

"You saddle bum," he said. "You're going to stop me? Draw, you runt!"

Limpy moved forward a little. Cane glanced at the house and then back at Limpy. The little man kept on slowly.

"Stop," said Cane as he raised his Colt.

Limpy kept on. Cane cocked his Colt. Suddenly he shifted. Before he could fire Limpy's right hand slapped down for a draw. The cripple did not draw. Instead he gripped the Colt butt and tipped the holster up. He fired from the bottom of the holster. Cane staggered forward, staring at the little man with wide eyes. He dropped his six-gun and went down on his knees and then lay still. Limpy moved forward, hooking a boot under the foreman's body to roll it over. Hal Cane stared upward sightlessly. Limpy hobbled to the porch. Jed raised his head.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

Limpy knelt beside Jed and worked swiftly to staunch the flow of blood.

"You never asked me my last name."

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"What is it?"

"Banners." Limpy made a tourniquet out of his bandana. "Ever hear of me?"

"Tipper Banners?"

"Yeh. Afore a crazy rustler blew a hole in my leg with a double-barreled Greener loaded with Blue Whistlers."

Jed whistled. George Banners, nicknamed Tipper because of his habit of firing from the bottom of his holster, tipping the six-gun back, had been one of the best lawmen in Maricopa County years back. Limpy sat back.

"You won't bleed to death," he said.

Marie ran out on the porch.

"How is he, Limpy?" she asked.

"He'll live. How's your paw?"

"He was only creased." Marie knelt beside Jed and put her arm around his shoulders.

Limpy grinned.

"How about them two coyotes?"

Marie looked away.

"Dead."

Limpy stood up and looked down at them.

"I'll get 'em outa the house. Bad enough with all them bullet holes in there without havin' dead coyotes in there too!"

It was late at night when the house was once again as it had been. Mark Monroe sat in his big leather armchair, holding a cup of coffee. Jed was propped up on the couch while Limpy straddled a chair backwards. Marie sat close to Jed.

"I was a fool," said Mark Monroe. "Hal Cane had me completely fooled. I had begun to believe every word he told me."

"I tried to warn you about him, boss," said Limpy.

"Yes. And I almost fired you for it."

Limpy glanced at Jed.

"Well, I've got to haul Cob Lewis and them other three into town tomorrow. What about this hoss thief, Mark?"

Mark Monroe drank his coffee.

"What hoss thief. All I see is a man who risked his neck, and later got a slug through him helping me. I wish I had need of another hand, Jed. The job would be yours."

Marie studied her father.

"I don't believe you ever really wanted to leave the Bar M, Dad, did you?"

He nodded.

"I was beginning to have my doubts."

She smiled.

"Then you can give Jed a job. We'll stock the Bar M again and live like we used to."

Mark Monroe nodded. "I'll do it, Marie. Limpy, you can take over as foreman, if you like."

Limpy shook his head.

"No. Let this young fella have it. He'll have to know how to run this place some day from the looks of things. I'll stick with my cooking. It's peaceful there, even if I get hazed a lot from the boys."

Jed grinned.

"You can always tell them who you are, Limpy."

"And spoil their fun? Not on your life, sonny."

Jed watched the little man limp out of the house. Old Man Monroe was looking into the fire, deep in thought. A hand crept into Jed's. He looked at Marie. His decision to come back had been well worth it, slug in the thigh and all. ♠ ♠ ♠

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(Continued from page 85)

nester's description, the man had been Bob Tarver.

Lew didn't like that about the blood in the cabin, either. Still Bob could have cut himself—what the hell, one of the bandits had wounded him, hadn't he? Sure, that was probably it. Bob had changed bandages before going out, and he'd bled a little.

The draw narrowed as it twisted south to come out on the narrow bench that ended at timber. When Lew saw the dark red spots on the rock, that looked like paint but weren't, he remembered the nester saying that the bandit they'd met up with, who would certainly be the man called Lanier, had also been wounded. What bothered Lew most, though, was this business of one bandit when there should be two. Ed Handley had slipped there. . . .

Lew was crossing the bench when he saw the horse, bridle dragging, grazing at the edge of timber. No mistaking that horse—it was Handley's. Lew rode up to it and saw blood on the saddle, and that was enough to set him going at a fast clip. Something was wrong here—damned wrong. Could it be that Handley was the third bandit? That he'd met up with Lanier, and there had been a showdown?

This was rough country, and if a man didn't know it he could easily lose his way. It was country that a man passed through but didn't linger in because there was no place to buy his grub, no where to hear the sound of another man's voice.

Lew picked up the wagon trail an hour later. It wasn't much—twin tracks winding through timber, across small meadows, following what the first wagons to cross here had termed the easiest route. Here, Lew stopped again to read sign, saw what he was looking for and rode on at a gallop. It was getting towards late afternoon when he heard the thin crack of a distant shot.

His mind sped ahead of him, to the line shack he knew lay in that direction, that

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Jorgeson used only at roundup time, when hunting strays. It was at the edge of a small meadow, next to a stream, and it took Lew ten minutes of hard riding to reach it. There was a horse tied in the trees, Bob's bay, and just then Lew heard another shot. He slid down, tied his mount and pulled his rifle from its saddle boot. He ran at a crouch to the edge of the meadow, seeing the log cabin and then the man with the rifle who stood behind the pine tree.

"Bob," he said.

Tarver swung as though a barb had caught his head and jerked it around. His face was gray as a stormy sky, gaunt as a skull, and his eyes burned at Lew with something beyond resentment.

"How—the hell did you happen to come here?"

"The same reason you came," Lew said, coming over. "Is Lanier holed up there?"

A pale ring formed around Tarver's mouth. "Lanier?"

"They identified Beuhler in town."

"Yeah, he's there," Tarver said, looking toward the cabin.

"Then we'd better get him out. Before dark and he slips away on us. Listen. He probably still thinks you're alone. I'll take him from the rear while you keep him thinking that. All right?"

Tarver moistened his pale lips. "All right."

LEW WORKED his way through the trees surrounding the meadow. He had meant to ask Bob if he'd seen Handley, but that could wait. He wondered with sudden gut-shocking revulsion if he was doing right in keeping back what he had been thinking now for some time. The trouble was he couldn't be sure about it, he could be wrong about it, and he'd back Bob until that time came.

It was a small cabin, with a shed around back where a saddled horse was tied. There was a side window, glassless, and it happened so simply and quickly that it surprised Lew. Looking through the window, he saw the slim and sickly looking blond man hunched on a bench near the partly open door, a rifle across his knees. The man coughed, his body jerking as he coughed. Lew put the barrel of his gun across the sill, seeing, in that moment, the bulky gunny sack on the floor beside the bench, and he said quietly, "Just let's drop that rifle and walk out the door grabbing sky."

"Hell," the man said wearily, hardly bothering to look around. It was so simple it was disconcerting. He rose slowly and tiredly, letting the rifle slide from his lap, and stepped outside. The shot made a sharp crack as Lew came around the cabin, and he got there just in time to see the man sink down and sprawl out on the grass.

Tarver came from the trees and Lew watched him. Tarver held his rifle across his waist, the way Lew was holding his, and neither man said anything until they were maybe ten yards apart. Then Lew said, "The money's inside, kid." It came to him that this was the first time he had ever called Bob kid.

"I didn't want to believe it," Lew went on. "I tried like hell not to believe it, but now you went and proved it yourself, didn't you?"

Tarver's face, looking more than ever like a skull, moved the way rubber moves when it is being stretched. Nothing much showed in his eyes except a nightmarish emptiness. Nothing of regret, or as to why he had done this thing. And yet the answer was plain to Lew—the weakness that had finally broken and become desperate to reach out and grab the nearest wealth. The weakness that could no longer face the hard years, the long years of sweat and toil, the lean years that always preceded the fat years. But in this man the thought of those years had crushed him while he was just beginning, and not even the assurance that a good woman was by his side had made a difference.

And as Lew thought these things he saw Tarver, who had suddenly become a stranger, swing to bring the rifle to bear, and Lew shot him.

And he stood there with his face like a rock. He stood there sober and silent for a long time.

Lew did a lot of thinking on the ride to town, leading two horses with their dead burdens, the gunny sack with the bank's money tied to the saddle horn. And when he talked to Surber, wooden-faced, he said, "That's the way it happened. Lanier got him just as I rode up, and I got Lanier when he tried to make a break."

"Yeah," Surber said in a dry voice. "And who got Handley? He was found this afternoon."

"I guess Lanier." Lew added savagely, "Damn it, that's the way it happened. Take it or lump it."

"All right," Surber said, looking away. "I don't blame you," he said. "It wouldn't fit in with what you got in mind." He added, smiling now at Lew, "No use accusing the dead if it's gonna hurt the living."

"Something like that," Lew said, and sighed. "Well, I'd better get going and break it to her. It won't be easy." His gaze dropped to the dust.

"It'll end up all right," the deputy said, still smiling. "You see if it won't." And his smile hardened.

"I'll stick around and find out," Lew said dryly. Then he mounted his horse and rode out of town. ♠ ♠ ♠

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By BESS RITTER

IMAGINE making yourself a fortune by firing lead at a snake—and missing it. That's exactly what happened, one day in the 1860s, in the state of Nevada, when a prospector who did just that, split a rock with his bullet, and saw that it was loaded with high grade ore. Or finding yourself a millionaire overnight—after spending the previous day roaring drunk. That occurred to a group of men who rolled a boulder down a hill while in their cups, and discovered, once they'd slept off the worst of their bender, that it had chipped off a rock and exposed a vein of really rich ore—richer than they'd ever imagined.

But these two lucky finds weren't isolated in the least. Everybody in the state at about that period of time was striking it rich the really easy way: You could dig an outdoor toilet in Tonopah, as some men did, and uncover a "pockety pay shoot" full of rich ore. You could sink a shaft for water in Searchlight, as did some others, and strike valuable deposits of gold, silver and copper. You could be young and guileless, like a couple of pre-teen agers, who were playing at mining by panning a badger hole at Weepah—and discovered ore worth $78,000. You could be old and disgusted, like one Guy Pritchard, who'd given up prospecting and gotten a job repairing an old road between Hawthorne and Bodie. Before sitting down, one day, to eat his lunch, he picked up a rock to clear the ground for his food—and discovered silver and galena worth $90 a ton. Even the very famous Comstock Lode was unearthed in the most roundabout method of prospecting possible: Henry Comstock was merely looking at a gopher hole, and wondering why it was full of such "queer-looking" stuff. ♠ ♠ ♠

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Western Ace High Stories, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1953. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1953. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-8506600. Certificate filed with N. Y. Co. Reg. Commission expires March 30, 1954. (Seal) Form 3526 - Rev. 8-50.

(Continued from page 39)

ing again, swinging to keep the rising sun out of his eyes.

"Why not?" Nora said bitterly. "He's done such a thing before!"

"Finch, clear something up," Kurland said. "She says that three years ago you hit a bank in Denver and gunned its cashier in the back. Did you?"

Halleck said, "Stand still, Kurland. And start remembering Tucson. You want lead in the gut, like before?"

The man's tone was contemptuous. He felt completely sure of himself—felt he had nothing at all to fear from Steve Kurland.

And Kurland was remembering Tucson, with sweat on him, though there was no heat yet in this new day. He was remembering vividly the smashing impact of those bullets, the searing pain, the dragging days and nights of torment. But if he had to crawl through that again, he would. Time came, he realized now, when a man must root himself solidly in one place and find out for sure what he was, no matter what happened to him while he was doing it. That time was here.

Jack Tiler was standing rigid, face frozen and only his eyes betraying the fury he felt at being caught like this, through his own act of under-estimating Finch Halleck. Tiler knew he could not drop the satchel and get his gun out in time to match Halleck's draw, or even come close. But he was going to try, even if it meant he had to take every bullet in Halleck's gun.

"Tiler, don't move!" Kurland said. "He's mine!"

"Ah?" Halleck said. "This time, you fool, they'll bury you!"

THEN HE was moving, twisting, drawing, all with a speed almost beyond measuring, a speed that caught Tiler with its blinding suddenness.

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Here was a man who knew every trick of the gun-fighter's art, every shift and strategem. But like most men who lived by the gun, he had fallen into a tested pattern and Kurland had seen it displayed before. Halleck had the first shot, blasting it across his body, which he had turned to narrow the target Kurland had to aim at, while still keeping an eye on Tiler. The first bullet for Kurland, the second for Tiler—

But Steve Kurland remembered Tucson, and he had moved also—and that first shot missed. By no more than a finger's-breadth, he thought, but still a miss. And now he knew, with realization of the miss, Halleck would swing a little, quarteringly, to make completely sure of his next bullet. Gun out, Kurland waited. saw Halleck make the quarter-turn, directly into the sight of his weapon. He saw the angry scowl put on Halleck's face by that wasted bullet—and saw it shatter as his own first slug scored a smashing hit.

Kurland moved again, a scissoring step to his left. Not fast enough. Halleck's second try hit him somewhere low, a full swing of a sledge-hammer crashing into his side, numbing it. Kurland feinted to his left, moved back to his right, slugged lead into Halleck again.

Four shots so far, so close together they merged in one long tearing explosion. A second or so of flashing time. Tiler was just letting go of the satchel and starting his hand in its sweep toward his own gun. Halleck's mouth twisted with fury as he tried to track the shifting phantom he must have seen only dimly through eddying gun-smoke. So he had seemed to Kurland at Tucson, when Kurland had not managed to pull trigger even once. Halleck tried his third bullet, a miss so wide Kurland did not even hear it pass and Kurland, with deliberation possible now, hammered lead into him a third time, dead center.

Halleck fell forward to hands and knees, looked down at the dirt, and then hit it with his face.

Tiler's gun was just clearing leather. He stared at Halleck, then at Kurland, and slowly put the weapon away again.

Kurland settled to one knee. Blood above his hip and a pulsing hurt beginning. But it was a familiar sort of pain. He was surprised to discover he did not greatly mind.

Tiler came to stand beside him.

"Steve I'm ready to eat every word I said to you. If you like, you can shove them past my teeth with your fist!"

"I was scared to death, Jack."

"Why, so was I. Only a fool wouldn't have been," Tiler said. "But you faced him and you beat him. You've got all the guts you'll ever need, boy."

It came to him that Tiler was right, and the knowledge was like a great weight lifted from his shoulders. Then Nora was there, kneeling beside Steve Kurland, an arm about him, heedless of dust and blood.

"I'll always be so proud to have known you!" she whispered.

He suddenly realized that only having known her could never be enough for him—but he remembered also her opinion of Verde City.

"This is my home town," he said. "I guess I'll put on the sheriff's star again, keep on living here. And if you didn't think it so ramshackle, I'd never let you get on that train for Denver!"

Nora's face was luminous as she smiled. "Why, now that I see by daylight, this is rather a nice town, Steve. I think I'd enjoy living here."

She leaned toward him, with great simplicity. Kurland matched this gesture and they gently kissed. Then full understanding of his luck hit him and he drew Nora into a fierce embrace.

They were alike. For each of them a gray tortured past was ending, a new life beginning. One as bright as the sunlight about them. Forty years or so from now, Kurland thought, they would still remember this day, and not a second of it must be wasted. He kissed her again. ♠ ♠ ♠

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